A Hard Journey to Authenticity
Narratives of Puer Tea from Yunnan in Southwest China

Jinghong Zhang

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The Australian National University

March 2011
This thesis is wholly my own original work, except where otherwise cited in the text.

Jinghong Zhang
Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Program
ANU College of Asia & the Pacific
The Australian National University
Acknowledgements

Without Andrew Walker, my supervisor, it would still be an unaccomplished dream for me to conduct this research on Puer tea. Looking back, I can see how much tolerance, encouragement and insight he has given me, a student who didn’t have any overseas study experiences before commencing my PhD at the Australian National University. I have benefited greatly from his wisdom, his ability to come straight to the main research issue and the way he developed a pragmatic interest prior to building academic principles. He has used specific methods at specific stages, directing me step by step to select, sort, process, and finally brew this thesis.

The ethnographic film making of David MacDougall and Judith MacDougall have inspired me to use video as an important component of this research. Planning, filming and editing for video component of this thesis has benefitted enormously from Judith’s profound insights, meticulous inspection and continual kind support. I have learned so much from her about both study and life, from yingshi (film, 影视) to yinshi (food, 饮食). And her motherly considerations have given me invaluable warmth in Canberra’s winter.

Nicholas Tapp always read my chapters as soon as he could, and gave me detailed and sincere advice promptly. His wide knowledge has enriched my reading and use of literature in this thesis. Many of his comments have made me keep on pondering and they will be useful starting points for future research. Amrih Widodo enlightened me to think about questions from alternative perspectives and in unconstrained ways. I often felt that if I had one third of his intelligence, I would write a thesis that was three times as good. Duncan Campbell kindly assisted me in deepening my understanding of Chinese cultural consumption. Several books he recommended became the favourite ones that I have used in the thesis. I have also benefited from writing groups at the Australian National University organized by Andrew Kipnis and Craig Reynolds, and have collected many useful suggestions from the participants. Pip Deveson helped me with converting the films into DVD. She displayed great patience and taught me how to solve technical problems via trial and error.

I am grateful to Mu Jihong, Zhang Yi, Zheng Bineng and Li Jinwen who guided me into the world of Puer tea. Eddie Tsang, Matthew Chen, Lei Bin, Peter D’Abbs, Gao
Fachang, Sidney Cheung, Yu Shuenn-Der and Yang Haichao gave me kind assistance in fieldwork and exchanged excellent insights with me. The experiences of drinking tea and talking with various tea friends have made me feel that my research is full of Puer tea’s life vitality.

I am lucky to have friendships with Li Chyi-Chang, Masayuki Nishida, Keri Mills, Jakkrit Sangkhamenee, Guan Jia, Li Yinan, Gu Jie, Sophie McIntyre, Rachel P. Lorenzen and Yasir Alimi at the Australian National University. They have made life in Canberra more meaningful to me. Mother and Father Chuang kindly allowed me to live at their place for most of my time in Canberra.

It was from Yang Kun that I learnt the value of conducting a research out of my authentic interest. He contributed many brilliant ideas for me including the way I have used film. I am very sad that he could not see my final work, as he passed away in March 2010.

Most of all I owe this research to my husband Jingfeng, who shared many pleasures and difficulties with me throughout my study, and also my parents and brother, whose belief in me makes any achievement possible. It’s actually far beyond any textual ability for me to thank them.

In jokes, my family and friends call me chaboshi (茶博士), very literally “a tea doctor.” In Chinese, this refers to those who work in a tea house and serve water for guests to make tea. I am happy to be called so, if I could express my sincere thanks to all the above people by serving them a cup of tea.
Abstract

This thesis examines narratives about the recent Puer tea fad in China, during which the production region, Yunnan, has experienced changes in both tea production and tea consumption. The thesis illustrates the unprecedented depth of the contentious fashioning and refashioning of a commodity during reform China’s consumption revolution. The experience of Puer Tea demonstrates both enduring and transformed characteristics of Chinese cultural consumption.

The rising commercialisation in twenty-first century China has generated multiple desires for presenting newly constructed forms of nationalism, regionalism and individualism. This is exemplified by the desire to authenticate one’s unique identity via authentic Puer tea. A new discourse has emerged about Puer tea’s transformative cultural value: “the longer the storage, the higher the value” (yue chen yue xiang, 越陈越香). This constructed value was, however, challenged by the flourishing market in counterfeit tea and controversy about how Puer tea itself was to be defined.

This thesis links the recent history of Puer tea to the Chinese concept of jianghu, a non-mainstream space popularly used in martial arts novels as well as in daily life, in which the actors seek to go beyond the governmental law and solve problems with self-help. This intrinsic feature of Chinese jianghu culture is crucial in understanding Puer tea’s chaotic situation and the responses to this adopted by different Puer tea actors. This will explain why it has been impossible to standardise Puer tea’s authenticity. Determining if tea is authentic can only be empirically, contextually and multiply self-managed via inter-personal negotiation. Drawing on previous research on the construction of meanings in relation to food, this thesis seeks to bring specific Chinese concepts into the English language literature to further highlight how a certain food’s meanings can be deeply shaped by its cultural and social context.

The ethnography follows Puer tea’s life history from its main production areas to its sites of consumption. Film is used as an important methodology to trace the social life of Puer tea. Segments of film, to be viewed alongside the text, illustrate the social and physical landscape of tea production and visualize people’s sensory experiences in tea
consumption. The video seeks to go beyond textual representation and provide additional narratives about Puer tea, echoing the *jianghu* theme of multiple voices and alternative resolutions.
Glossary and Overview of Puer Tea Categories and Production Process

- **Puer tea categories:** there are three ways of categorizing Puer tea.

  1. According to time period, there have been three periods of Puer tea production:

     a). *Haoji Puer* (号级普洱茶): Puer tea with old family commercial brands. These are the earliest Puer tea products, produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by private family tea companies in what is now Xishuangbanna (including the Six Great Tea Mountains and Menghai) and Simao. Those originating in the Six Great Tea Mountains are regarded as the earliest. Most of this tea is now kept in museums or in the hands of connoisseurs, mostly in the round caked form. Famous brands include *Tongqing Hao* (同庆号) Puer tea, *Songpin Hao* (宋聘号) Puer tea, *Tongxing Hao* (同兴号) Puer tea. *Tongqing, Songpin, Tongxing* were all names of old family commercial brands in the Six Great Tea Mountains (Figure 1.1 and 1.2).

     b). *Yinji Puer* tea (印级普洱茶): Puer tea with the *Zhongcha* (中茶) brand, the name of the China Tea Corporation Yunnan Provincial Branch. The brand mark of *Zhongcha* is composed of one Chinese character *cha* (茶) in the center and eight Chinese characters *zhong* (中) in a circle (Figure 4.2). This Puer was produced from the late 1930s to the 1980s by the national tea factories of Yunnan, such as the National Tea Factory of Menghai, the National Tea Factory of Kunming, and the National Tea Factory of Xiaguan.

     c). *Xiandai Puer* tea (现代普洱茶): Modern Puer tea produced since the 1990s when private tea companies re-emerged and the Puer tea industry boomed in Yunnan.

  2. According to different processing techniques, especially fermentation, Puer tea can be categorized as raw Puer tea, artificially fermented Puer tea and aged Puer tea. This is discussed in detail in the Introduction.

  3. According to its outward appearance, Puer tea can be categorized as loose Puer tea (*sancha*, 散茶) and compressed Puer tea (*jincha*, 紧茶). There are various shapes of compressed Puer tea, such as a round cake, a brick, a mushroom, or a bowl (see Figure 0.3, 0.4).
• **Pre-production and post-production:**

Pre-production refers to the production stages from the harvest of the tea leaves, rough processing as loose tea material (maocha), and fine processing as a compressed form of Puer tea with wrapping. Post-production refers to the long-term storage process. It is commonly said that the taste of Puer tea, whether raw Puer tea or artificially fermented Puer tea, will be improved after long-term storage.

• **Rough production and fine production:**

They are the two procedures in pre-production. Rough production (cu zhi, 粗制) includes harvesting, stir-frying, rolling and drying. The final product of rough production is maocha (毛茶), the dried basic tea material in loose form.

Fine production (jing zhi, 精制) refers to the process that turns loose maocha into compressed and wrapped tea. In fine production for raw Puer tea, maocha is steamed, hand or machine shaped, pressed, dried, and wrapped.

In fine production for artificially fermented Puer tea, maocha is piled indoors under a specific temperature and humidity. A microbial enzymatic reaction, one kind of fermentation, takes place to mature the tea. This usually takes two or three months, during which the piled tea material needs to be turned over several times to assure that all the material is completely fermented. Then, after drying, the same fine processing procedures used on raw Puer tea are applied: steaming, shaping, compressing, drying and wrapping,

• **Harvesting/picking:**

Puer tea’s harvesting starts in spring in February or March every year. Tea leaves keep sprouting all through the spring, summer and autumn (usually until November). Spring tea is the best. Summer tea is regarded as inferior due to too many rainy days. In China the standard way of tea picking is one bud plus two leaves. But Puer tea often includes two or three extra leaves.

• **Sorting:**

Sorting involves taking out bad tea leaves from the good ones, and also separating the leaves into different grades of tea material. Fresh tea leaves are sorted soon after picking. Maocha is also sorted for further fine production.
• **Stir-frying (chao cha, 炒茶):**

Stir-frying is one way to suppress the fermentation in the tea leaves. With modern processing it is done by a stir-frying machine. Traditionally, the tea leaves are placed in a large wok heated by charcoal or wood, and people use their hands (wearing gloves) or bamboo sticks to stir-fry the tea leaves until their color and quality has changed. The general term for this fermentation suppression is *shaqing* (杀青, fixation). Apart from stir-frying, there are other methods of fixation used on other types of tea, such as steaming (popularly used on Japanese green tea) or sun-drying (an older method of fixation before other methods were invented).

• **Rolling:**

Rolling has several functions. First, different methods of rolling will lead to different tea leaf shapes. Second, rolled tea leaves are better for storing, whereas non-rolled tea leaves are crisp and easily broken. Third, rolling allows the tea brew to be easily released in later infusing, and different degree of rolling will result in different flavors.

• **Drying:**

Drying is applied in various stages processing. In rough production, after rolling, tea leaves are dried to produce *maocha*. In fine production, compressed tea is dried before wrapping (sometimes also after wrapping). Sun-drying is used if the weather is fine; if not, baking (by fire or oven) is used.

• **Fermentation:**

There are two types of fermentation for Puer tea. One is oxidation. Once tea comes into contact with air, oxidation happens. As stated above, stir-frying suppresses the oxidation to a certain degree. The other type of fermentation is a result of microbial enzymatic reaction, which is used for artificially fermented Puer tea. It is said that for both raw Puer tea and artificially fermented Puer tea, fermentation will continue during their long-term storage. This is usually called natural post-fermentation. “Natural” is a relative concept, as some artificial methods may be further applied. In this “natural” post-fermentation, both oxidation and microbial enzymatic reaction may occur, depending upon the temperature and humidity of the storage.
- An overview of the Puer tea production process:

| Pre-production | Rough Production | harvesting—sorting—stir-frying—rolling—drying—raw *maocha*  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Presentation 1 on DVD 2, Film 2 on DVD 1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Fine Production| Raw Puer tea     | sorting—weighing—shaping—compressing—drying—wrapping  
|                |                  | (Presentation 2, Film 3, 5, 6 on DVD 2)  |
|                | Artificially fermented Puer tea | stacking and moistening, turning over and fermenting—artificially fermented *maocha*—sorting—weighing—shaping—compressing—drying—wrapping  
| Post-production| Storage and further fermenting |
Transliteration, Names and Measures

In this thesis all transcriptions of Mandarin Chinese, including the Yunnan dialects, follow the standard pinyin romanization system. I have made exceptions for commonly used names such as Hong Kong, some Cantonese terms that have been accepted in English such as kungfu, yum cha, dim sum, and other names that have been published elsewhere using Wade-Giles or other romanization systems.

In relation to people’s names, for some I have used their full real names based on their agreement, such as Zhang Yi, Lü Lizhen and Gao Fachang. These people are important in Puer tea’s historical narratives. For some I have used their partial real names, such as Mr. Zheng, Mr. Li and Zongming, mainly for the convenience of reading in English. For some I have used pseudonyms, given that they are unwilling to have their real names mentioned. When I use full Chinese names, I put the surname prior to the given name, to be consistent with Chinese custom. For Chinese literature citations, I have used full Chinese names to differentiate the authors who share the same surname and also the same publishing year.

References to monetary values are mostly in RMB (yuan). Throughout the time of my fieldwork in 2007, US$1 was approximately equivalent to 7 RMB. In one case I used Singapore dollars. S$1 at that time was approximately equivalent to US$0.57 (4 RMB).

For the area of tea cultivation I use the unit mu. 1 mu is approximately equivalent to 0.0667 hectares.
### Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCTV</td>
<td>China Central Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CADN</td>
<td>China Administrative Division Net</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBCMGD</td>
<td>Editorial Board of Cha Ma Gu Dao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBMCA</td>
<td>Editorial Board of Mengla Country Annals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBSAA</td>
<td>Editorial Board of Simao Area Annals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBSC</td>
<td>National Bureau of Statistics of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPM</td>
<td>National Palace Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBQIQC</td>
<td>National Bureau of Quality Inspection and Quarantine of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YRTN</td>
<td>Yunnan Radio and Television Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTG</td>
<td>Yiwu Township Government)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTIEC</td>
<td>Yunnan Tea Import and Export Corporation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................. 1
Abstract ............................................................................................................................... iii
Glossary and Overview of Puer Tea Categories and Production Process .................. v
Transliteration, Names and Measures ............................................................................. ix
Acronyms .......................................................................................................................... x
Contents .............................................................................................................................. xi
Figures ............................................................................................................................... xiv
Film on DVD ................................................................................................................... xviii

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Puer Tea: An Exotic Familiarity ....................................................................................... 1
All Puer Tea is from Yunnan ......................................................................................... 6
Transformation and the Desire to Balance ................................................................ 14
The Jianghu of Puer Tea and Handcrafted Authenticity ............................................. 22
Outline of Thesis Structure ......................................................................................... 29

Spring ............................................................................................................................... 33

Chapter 1 “The Authentic Tea Mountain Yiwu” ...................................................... 34
Aged Puer Tea .................................................................................................................. 34
Historical Glory ................................................................................................................ 37
Taste Preferences ............................................................................................................. 48
A Cultural Tea Tour ........................................................................................................ 56
Conclusion: Imagined Originality ................................................................................. 63

Chapter 2 Tensions under the Bloom ...................................................................... 66
Bloom with Modern Regulation .................................................................................... 66
Bloom at High Price ......................................................................................................... 73
“A Battle of Wits and Bravery” .................................................................................... 81
Struggling for the Authentic Yiwu ................................................................................ 90
Conclusion: Original Taste and Authentic Relationships ............................................ 95

Summer ........................................................................................................................... 99

Chapter 3 “Yunnan: The Home of Puer Tea” ............................................................ 100
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4 Heating Up and Cooling Down</th>
<th>137</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tea Frying and Tea Speculation</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Earthquakes</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Voices from Yunnan</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over Cooked or Too Raw?</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: A Cultural Dilemma</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Autumn                                | 158 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 5 Puer Tea with Remorse</th>
<th>159</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression and Worries</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History from Nationalized to Private Tea Business in Yiwu</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food or Tea</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest Tea or Terrace Tea</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquired Taste for the Aged</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Reflective Worries</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 6 Transformed Qualities</th>
<th>193</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Transformation</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Walking on Two Legs”</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Wait-and-see” and the “Blank Version”</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tu Cha”: Indigenous Tea</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Agent</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Multiple Transformations</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Winter                                 | 218 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 7 Tea Tasting and Counter-Tea Tasting</th>
<th>219</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interacted Space</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against Huyou</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Plus Modern</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 8 Interactive Authenticities ........................................... 243
  A Changeable Social Biography ........................................... 243
  Cold and Warm ............................................................... 245
  Puer Green Tea: *Fan* and *Mi* .......................................... 250
  "The Younger the Better" ................................................. 257
  New Tradition ............................................................... 261
  Conclusion: Multiple Visions ............................................. 271

Conclusion: An Alternative Authenticity .................................. 273
  Packaging and Counter-Packaging .................................... 273
  Rethinking *Jianghu* and Multiplicity ................................ 275
  Film and Alternative Narratives ....................................... 278

References .............................................................................. 281
Figures

Figure 0.1: Yunnan. ........................................................................................................ xix
Figure 0.2: Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan. .................. xx
Figure 0.3: Two kinds of loose raw Puer tea. .......................................................... 3
Figure 0.4: Various shapes of compressed Puer tea sold in the market. .............. 3
Figure 0.5: A brew of raw Puer tea. ........................................................................ 4
Figure 0.6: A brew of artificially fermented Puer tea. .......................................... 4
Figure 0.7: One type of large tea leaf, grown in Xishuangbanna Yunnan. .......... 8
Figure 0.8: Lahu people under their tea trees in Menghai Xishuangbanna. ........ 12
Figure 0.9: “Hani Puer tea” sold at the 2007 Simao tea trade fair. ...................... 13
Figure 0.10: A display of a tea caravan at the 2007 Kunming tea trade fair. ...... 13
Figure 0.11: Lu Yu Peng Cha Tu [The painting of Lu Yu brewing Tea]. .......... 16
Figure 0.12: Pincha Tu [The painting of tea tasting]. ........................................... 16
Figure 0.13: China's GDP Per Capita (1955-2005). .............................................. 18
Figure 0.14: A page in the opening issue of Puer Jianghu. ................................. 23
Figure 0.15: A display of “Puer jianghu weapons.” ........................................... 23
Figure 1.0 Spring tea buds in Yiwu. ........................................................................ 33
Figure 1.1: Label of Tongqing Puer tea.
Figure 1.2: Label of Songpin Puer tea. ................................................................. 36
Figure 1.3: “Red Seal” (Hongyin) Puer tea.
Figure 1.4: “Green Seal” (Lüyin) Puer tea. ............................................................. 36
Figure 1.5 A view of Yiwu. ...................................................................................... 38
Figure 1.6 and 1.7: Copied tribute tea brands. ..................................................... 41
Figure 1.8: A sketch map of the Six Great Tea Mountains. ................................. 43
Figure 1.9: Luo Deshou, an old caravan driver and trader in Yiwu. .................... 43
Figure 1.10: “Seven-son tea cake” put on the balcony of a Yiwu family house. ..... 48
Figure 1.11: Machine pressing tea in Menghai.
Figure 1.12: Grindstone pressing tea in Yiwu. ..................................................... 50
Figure 1.13: Photo (a) in Zeng’s book. ................................................................. 57
Figure 1.14: Photo (b) in Zeng’s book. ................................................................. 57
Figure 1.15: Photo (c) in Zeng’s book. ................................................................. 57
Figure 1.16: An 800-year-old tea tree in Yiwu. .................................................... 62
Figure 1.17: A drawing by a visitor. .................................................................... 62
Figure 2.1: A sketch map of central Yiwu. ......................................................... 70
Figure 2.2: Mr. Li’s house. ................................................................. 71
Figure 2.3: The courtyard of Mr. Li’s house in 2006. ............................... 71
Figure 2.4: The courtyard of Mr. Li’s house in 2007. ............................... 72
Figure 2.5: Maocha being sun-dried in the main street of Yiwu. ..................... 79
Figure 2.6: With money gained from tea, more constructions are going on. ......... 80
Figure 2.7: A Miao woman (left) from Honghe (southeast Yunnan). ............... 80
Figure 2.8: Forest tea. ...................................................................... 83
Figure 2.9: Terrace tea. ...................................................................... 83
Figure 2.10: Tea leaves with fine “fur.” ...................................................... 84
Figure 2.11: Tea area sketch map “remapped” by Wen. ................................. 86
Figure 2.12: Yao tea-processor in Ding village. ........................................... 87
Figure 2.13: “Inharmonious” picture (a) taken by Sin. ................................. 92
Figure 2.14: “Inharmonious” picture (b) taken by Sin. ................................. 92
Figure 3.0: Tea Stir-frying in Yiwu. .......................................................... 99
Figure 3.1: Before the name change. .......................................................... 100
Figure 3.2: After the name change. ............................................................ 100
Figure 3.3: Sculptures in the public garden of Simao. ................................. 102
Figure 3.4: 10,000 mu terrace tea land in Simao. ......................................... 103
Figure 3.5: Tea serving performance at the tea trade fair in Simao. ................. 103
Figure 3.6: The Golden Melon Tribute Puer tea. .......................................... 104
Figure 3.8: Cover of the Pu-Erh Special Issue in April 2007. ......................... 105
Figure 3.9: Xishuangbanna government initiated using Dai characters. ........... 108
Figure 3.10: A map of Yunnan with Puer as the tea center. ......................... 109
Figure 3.11: Tea caravan in 2005. ............................................................ 109
Figure 3.12: The map in a Jinghong tea house............................................ 110
Figure 3.13: Caked Puer tea (400 grams) carried to Beijing by caravan in 2005. ... 110
Figure 3.14 and 3.15: The stage play Yunnan Yingxiang. ............................ 121
Figure 3.16 and 3.17: Scenes of Shangri-La. ............................................... 121
Figure 3.18: Neon lights at a bus station in Kunming. ..................................... 123
Figure 3.19: Exhibition of tea caravan artifacts at the 2006 Kunming tea trade fair. 123
Figure 3.20: “Improving Beauty Puer Tea for Ladies.” ............................... 127
Figure 3.21: Puer tea paste sold at the 2007 Guangzhou tea trade fair. .......... 127
Figure 3.22: Puer Tea Auctions. .............................................................. 128
Figure 3.23: Pressed Puer tea sold at the 2007 Simao tea trade fair. ............... 132
Figure 8.12: New Kunming. .........................................................................................270
Figure 8.13: The courtyard and the surrounding tile roofs present a nice
quadrangle. .....................................................................................................................270

**Film on DVD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film 1: Twice Puer Tea in Hong Kong (15’)</th>
<th>DVD 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Film 2: Spring Harvest (29’)</td>
<td>DVD 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film 3: Visiting Yiwu, Tasting History (30’)</td>
<td>DVD 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film 4: Spring Tasting (35’)</td>
<td>DVD 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film 5: Authentic Tea (24’)</td>
<td>DVD 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film 6: Walking on Two Legs (23’)</td>
<td>DVD 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film 7: Tasting Ancient &amp; Modern (6’)</td>
<td>DVD 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation 1: Rough Production Process of Puer Tea in Yiwu</td>
<td>DVD 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation 2: Fine Production Process of Puer Tea in Yiwu</td>
<td>DVD 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 0.1: Yunnan. Area: 394,000 square kilometers. Population: 44.5 million (CADN 2010a). The Han make up almost 70 percent of the population. Apart from the Han, there are 25 ethnic groups (according to the government's classification). This is the largest number of ethnic groups in any province in China.
Figure 0.2: Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan. Area: 20,000 square kilometers. Population: 840,000. Apart from the Han, there are 13 ethnic groups, such as the Dai, Hani, Lahu, Bulang and Jinuo (according to the government’s classification), who totally make up almost 74 percent of the population. Xishuangbanna is divided into three administrative parts: Menghai County, Jinghong City and Mengla County (CADN 2010b).
Introduction

Puer Tea: An Exotic Familiarity

I grew up in Kunming, Yunnan, in southwest China. Tea was a familiar thing since I was very young. At my family house there was always a tea jar. Once the stored tea was a little old, say, over two years, it had to be thrown away. As a child, I was taught to make tea when a guest came. I simply put some loose tea leaves in a glass, and then poured in hot water. The brew in the glass was yellow green, and everybody knew that this was Yunnan’s green tea. Once the tea in the glass was drunk a little, I was told by my parents to add more water so that the tea brew would not become too strong, as the tea leaves were still infusing. The guest might not be thirsty, but he sipped the tea frequently. My parents and the guest talked about something apart from tea. The tea in this talking was important as well as unimportant.

Like many people at that time, I didn’t care about the difference between Yunnan’s Puer tea and green tea. According to my impression, green tea was the normal loose kind stored in a jar to serve to guests; Puer tea was made in a compressed shape, usually like a bowl. The latter was more often used as a gift for friends outside Yunnan rather than for daily drinking. I once found some leftover Puer tea in a cabinet. Each piece of tea was shaped like a small bowl, half the size of a table-tennis ball. Out of curiosity, I took one and infused it. The brew had a similar colour to Yunnan’s green tea. But, unexpectedly, the compressed small bowl swelled up in the glass after being brewed with hot water, to more than five times its original size. The brew was so strong that I decided I didn’t like Puer tea.

Puer tea had existed almost unnoticeably to me until 2002, when I participated in a film crew visiting Simao and Xishuangbanna, two of the tea production areas in Yunnan. The film crew was making a documentary about the people in Yunnan who were involved in tea production. On the way, the film director from Beijing kept drinking Puer tea bought in Yunnan. The dry compressed tea and the brew he made were both dark red. I asked for a taste. It was quite smooth when swallowing, but it had an earthy smell. Another friend in the crew, also from Yunnan, said it was moldy. Its colour, its smell and its taste were all new to me. The director said that this Puer tea was good for controlling his high blood pressure. Later on we arrived at Yiwu, a township in
Xishuangbanna, a famous place for Puer tea. The local people showed us how to produce Puer tea in compressed cakes. Contrasted to the tea drunk by the director, the local Puer tea of Yiwu had a “sunny” smell, and its brew was the same yellow green as that of Yunnan’s green tea.

Back in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, I soon heard more new information about Puer tea, which was all new to me. Puer tea, compressed like a cake, a bowl or a brick, was selling exceptionally well (Figure 0.3 and 0.4). There was the green kind as well as the dark kind. From traders I learnt that, respectively, they were sheng cha (生茶), raw Puer tea, and shu cha (熟茶), artificially fermented Puer tea (Figure 0.5 and 0.6). In addition, I was shown a third kind, aged Puer tea declared to be over five years, some as old as several decades. This aged tea was developed from the above two kinds and it was much more expensive. A popular saying was applied to Puer tea: yue chen yue xiang (越陈越香), literally “the longer you store the tea, the better taste it will have,” in other words “the longer the better.” The most precious Puer tea, I was told, was that originating in Yunnan and now collected by connoisseurs in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Moreover, Puer tea was appreciated for its aged value not only in terms of storage, but also in terms of the age of the tea plant, although this aspect of knowledge was less accessible to ordinary consumers. There was the differentiation between forest tea (da shu cha, 大树茶) and terrace tea (tai di cha or xiao shu cha, 台地茶或小树茶).¹ Forest tea was said to be from tall tea trees—often over 100 years—sheltered by the forest canopy, initially cultivated by ethnic minorities like the Bulang and Hani in Yunnan. Terrace tea referred to narrowly and regularly arranged tea bushes, whose history in Yunnan only started in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.² In the current market, the price of forest Puer tea was four or five times more expensive than terrace tea, because the former was considered to come from a more ecologically healthy environment and it was thought to taste much better.

¹ I borrow the terms terrace tea and forest tea from Nick Menzies (2008).
² In another saying, terrace tea plantation started in the 1960s in Yunnan (see also EBMCA 1994: 226), but not on the scale of the 1970s and 1980s.
**Figure 0.3:** Two kinds of loose raw Puer tea. This is referred to as “basic tea material” (*maocha*).

**Figure 0.4:** Various shapes of compressed Puer tea sold in the market.
Figure 0.5: A brew of raw Puer tea. The tea is one year old and stored in Kunming.

Figure 0.6: A brew of artificially fermented Puer tea, displayed at the 2007 Kunming tea trade fair. The colour of very aged Puer tea is similar to this, but the taste is different.
Whatever its specific kind, Puer tea was being described with an attractive but perplexing profile in popular books and in the market. It was said that it had much better medicinal functions and cultural values than any other tea. It also had multiple definitions. It was being authenticated and re-authenticated again and again for ordinary consumers, who, however, were often lost in these multiple authentications. The most serious problem was that there were too many counterfeits; three years of Puer tea storage was often said to be thirty; tea material originating in Sichuan was declared as coming from Yunnan; terrace Puer tea was wrapped with forest Puer tea markings; and many people found it hard to understand the difference between Yunnan’s green tea and raw Puer tea. The information on a package of Puer tea was often marked unclearly, and judgements about the tea depended upon one’s own ability and careful negotiations with the traders.

Even though its authenticity hadn’t been clarified, Puer tea was continuously celebrated. A growing number of “tea experts” were writing about Puer tea and trading Puer tea. The mass media found it a good moment to collect rich material about tea. The government of Yunnan declared Puer tea to be a provincial symbol and added support to all sorts of tea propaganda. In Kunming tea houses, Puer tea was infused in delicate tea sets. Tea tasting events, which had only been seen in ancient paintings and literatures, flourished. People met with Puer tea, talked about Puer tea, and competed with Puer tea. In order to find out the “truth” about Puer tea, urban people launched journeys into the rural production areas. These areas had boosted the rural tea economy, changing the system of agricultural production very deeply.

As a result of all these efforts, the profile and price of Puer tea peaked in early 2007, but it unexpectedly dropped in May of the same year. Before and after this, many people had been pleased or worried, gaining or losing, struggling or relaxing, all because of Puer tea.

How has Puer tea been transformed from something ordinary and familiar to something remarkable and exotic in Yunnan? Why does it attract so many people to collect, drink, admire, and study it? Why are there multiple voices, in which the value of Puer tea is quickly elevated but soon dropped? Why have counterfeits flourished despite so many appeals for regulation? And how do ordinary tea peasants, traders and consumers survive in this chaotic battle? This thesis reflects upon how Puer tea is packaged by
multiple actors into a fashionable drink with multiple authenticities, and more importantly how such packaging is challenged and unpacked by multiple counter forces. Through looking at the packaging and un-packaging process, I want to display the temporal interaction between China’s reform period (formally since the early 1980s) and the past; the spatial interaction between Yunnan and the other tea production and consumption areas in China and overseas; and the social interaction between various Puer tea actors. These interactions surrounding Puer tea are taking place at a particular moment when China is endeavouring to speed up its economic and cultural development. New characteristics in producing and consuming things have appeared. But rather than looking at them as completely new characteristics, this thesis suggests that some of them have involved transformation and re-packaging of longstanding elements of Chinese culture. Puer tea, the so-called “antique fashion,” has become a mirror for us to see some aspects of the continuity of Chinese cultural consumption, though such continuity is often presented with new forms and new meanings.

All Puer Tea is from Yunnan

China was the earliest country in the world to domesticate tea-producing Camellia plants and begin drinking tea (Evans 1992; Zhu Zizhen 1996). A well-known legend tells that tea was initially discovered by Shen Nong (神农, Divine Farmer), a Chinese tribal head in the pre-historical age, a pioneer of Chinese agriculture and medicine. He was once poisoned by toxic herbs but luckily saved himself by using tea leaves (Zhu Zizhen 1996; Lu Yu 2003). Textual records in Chinese indicated that there was a specialized tea market in Sichuan as early as the sixth B.C. By the third century A.D., tea had become a popular drink in what is now southern China. And in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), tea drinking became prevalent all over the empire. The first known book about tea, The Classic of Tea by Lu Yu (2003), was produced in the eighth century (Evans 1992; Goodwin 1993; Zhu Zizhen 1996; Guan Jianping 2001). Compressed tea was popular initially, but loose tea began to be the dominant form after the fourteenth century, when it is said that the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (reign: 1368-1398), formally forbade compressed tea due to his concern with the burden it placed on tea producers. The emperor’s order, however, didn’t reach remote Yunnan.

---

3 Zhu Zizhen (1996), a scholar on tea history, argues that changes from compressed tea to loose tea had occurred before this period. But it is likely that the emperor’s command encouraged the production of loose tea.
which, at that time, was not under the complete control by the imperial court. As a result, Yunnan’s Puer tea has maintained the compressed form which is also much more convenient for long-distance trade. Almost all the recent popular writings on Puer tea, many of them composed by Yunnanese, stress that Chinese textual records on tea have long omitted Yunnan, a frontier region far away from central China, despite its significant role in tea production and consumption.

Many scholars agree that Yunnan province (Figure 0.1), in southwest China, is one of the most important places in the world for the origin of tea. Along the Mekong River in southwest Yunnan, there are plentiful and excellent tea trees resources, mainly located in three sub districts: Xishuangbanna, Simao and Lincang. Ethnic minority groups such as the Bulang, Deang, Wa, Hani and Jinuo are thought to have been cultivating tea for at least one thousand years (Huang Guishu 2002; Lin Chaomin 2006; Zhang Shungao and Su Fanghua 2007; Li Quanmin 2008). These early tea growers, who lived mainly in the uplands, have made important contributions to tea cultivation and utilization. In southern Yunnan (now Xishuangbanna), the Dai lords, who lived in lowland settlements, often dominated the inter-regional trade and acted as middleman between the tea growers and merchants. This was especially the case under the tusi system (the Chinese imperial indirect rule in these frontier regions from the thirteenth century until after 1949) (Hill 1989). Han immigrants didn’t come to Yunnan in large numbers until the fourteenth century and it was not until the early eighteenth century that Chinese merchants began entering the tea growing areas (Giersch 2006: 24-25). The Chinese came to dominate the tea trade between Yunnan and inland China and the neighboring Southeast Asian regions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hill 1989). And as many Chinese scholars stress, Han immigrants also introduced new tea production techniques and consumption customs into Yunnan (see Lin Chaomin 2006).

Most tea trees in Yunnan are thea assamica. This type of tea is referred to as large leaf tea, in contrast to thea sinensis, which is known as small leaf tea. Present tea science suggests that the tea plants in other parts of China—most of which are of the small leaf

---

5 These areas are famous for producing Puer tea. The northern, central and southern areas of Yunnan also have tea resources. Besides Puer tea, Yunnan also produces green tea and red tea (usually referred to as black tea in English) (Chen Xingtang 1994).
6 Some regard the Hani and Jinuo as the earliest tea harvesters in Yunnan (see Gao Fachang 2009: 25-29).
7 In China, large leaf tea occurs mainly in Yunnan. Other tea areas such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian, and Sichuan mainly produce small leaf tea. Yunnan also has small leaf tea, which was transplanted from Sichuan, a province to the north of Yunnan.
category—evolved from the large leaf category (Chen Xingtian 1994). This large-leaf resource is acknowledged to be the most suitable for making Puer tea (Figure 0.7). But Puer tea does not refer to a particular category or species of tea tree. According to a popular saying, it was named after the place "Puer," which had been a famous goods distribution and taxation centre in southern Yunnan since, at least, the early seventeenth century (Fang Guoyu 2001: 427-428; Xie Zhaozhi 2005: 3; Ma Jianxiong 2007: 563).

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 0.7:** One type of large tea leaf, grown in Xishuangbanna Yunnan.

Like Puer tea, many kinds of Chinese tea were initially named after certain places, whereas contemporary tea science names and categorizes tea mainly via production techniques. According to Chen Chuan (1984; 1999), a tea expert from Wuhan Agricultural University, so far there have been six kinds of Chinese tea, based upon different processing methods, especially fermentation. Tea fermentation usually refers to the oxidation reaction (from contact with the air) or microbial enzymatic reaction (from stacking in a moist environment). One important procedure in tea processing is to activate or to suppress the fermentation of the tea leaves, and different degrees of fermentation produce different tea flavors (Cai Rongzhang 2006). The category name is consistent with the colour of the tea brew: green tea, yellow tea, white tea, blue-green tea, red tea and dark tea. Under each category there are numerous sub-categories, determined by trivial differences in the tea plant and the tea processing. Green tea,
including jasmine tea (scented green tea), is non-fermented. Depending on the
different techniques of fermentation suppression and the drying process, green tea can
be subdivided into sun-dried green tea (shai qing, 晒青), steamed green tea (zheng qing,
蒸青), stir-fried green tea (chao qing, 炒青), and baked green tea (hong qing, 烘青).
Yellow tea is also non-fermented, and it is only slightly different to green tea. White tea
is very lightly fermented. Blue-green tea is semi-fermented, with oolong as its typical
representative. Red tea, which in English is referred to as black tea, is fully pre-
fermented. Dark tea is fully post-fermented. The difference between pre-fermentation
and post-fermentation lies in the timing of the fermentation: either at an earlier or later
stage of tea processing. According to this six-fold system of classification, Chen
categorizes Puer tea as dark tea. But when Puer tea became popular at the beginning of
the twenty-first century, new voices emerged, calling for Puer tea to be treated as an
independent tea category.

As Puer tea’s definition is debated, it is actually hard to tell what Puer tea exactly is. I
am going to outline some aspects that are relatively less controversial. On points where
there is disagreement, I will juxtapose various statements.

At present, basically there are three kinds of Puer tea due to different types of post-
fermentation. The first is raw Puer tea (sheng cha or xin cha, 生茶/新茶). Being made of
large leaf tea, raw Puer tea can be very astringent when it is young. Some tea experts
argue that post-fermentation is a key characteristic in Puer tea’s processing, but raw
Puer tea hasn’t had any post-fermentation at all and it is very similar to green tea (Zou
Jiaju 2005). Raw Puer tea can be made into a compressed form as a cake, bowl, brick or
melon, or it can be in loose form, which is often called maocha (毛茶), the basic material
of Puer tea (look at Presentation 1 and 2 on DVD 2 for the production process of
maocha 烘).

The next two categories use raw Puer tea (maocha) with different methods of
fermentation.

---

8 Jasmine tea is the most popular scented tea, which uses green tea as the basic material. Besides green tea, other types of tea could also be scented, and thus there are scented red tea, scented oolong tea, scented Puer tea.

9 In some tea production areas of China, stir-frying is still done by hand. Tea farmers use charcoal or wood to heat a large wok; fresh tea leaves are poured into the wok and stir-fried, by hand wearing gloves or with bamboo sticks, until their color and intrinsic quality has changed. In modern processing this is done by a machine.
The second category is aged raw Puer tea. This is raw Puer tea that should be at least five years old (lao sheng cha, 老生茶/xx 年生茶). It develops from the first category after long-term storage, though clear agreement hasn’t yet been reached on how many years’ storage is required before the tea is called aged. Generally, the older the tea, the more expensive its price. The amazing price of aged Puer teas stored in Hong Kong and Taiwan—for instance a piece of seventy-year-old Puer tea (357 grams) could be sold for more than one million RMB—has inspired the production and storage of more Puer tea. It is believed that “natural” fermentation (mostly oxidation, possibly also with some microbial enzymatic reaction) occurs during long-term storage. The result is that the tea turns from astringent to mild. But “natural” is a relative concept, because some people also deliberately create a very humid storage environment to accelerate the fermentation. This accelerated fermentation brings this second category close to the third category.

The third category is artificially fermented Puer tea or ripe Puer tea (shu cha, 熟茶). This is the product of a different method used to transform the astringent feature of raw Puer tea. By subjecting the basic tea material to a specific temperature and humidity, the post-fermentation of Puer tea (mainly microbial enzymatic reaction) is accelerated within two or three months.¹⁰ This artificial technique was formally invented in Kunming in 1973. In the tea market, it is said that artificially fermented Puer tea can also be further “naturally” stored for a long time, and it would then be called aged artificially fermented Puer tea.

Usually tea is appreciated for its freshness, especially green tea, the dominant tea consumed by the Chinese. Puer tea, by contrast, has come to be valued for its aged taste. This aged value wasn’t known to many Yunnanese and Chinese until the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century. The origin of this aged flavour is in contention, though it probably originated in the long distance trading of Puer tea and the interaction between Yunnan, the production region, and the various consumption places.

Before modern transportation emerged, Puer tea was carried from Yunnan, a rugged mountainous region, to the outside world by horse or mule caravan. This transport was dominated by Yunnanese Chinese (both Han and Muslim Chinese). Tibetans also joined in some parts of the journey (Hill 1989). Puer tea had become famous in Tibet, Beijing and Hong Kong, where people drank Puer tea to help with the digestion of the greasy

¹⁰ Unfortunately I don’t have any video showing the production process of artificially fermented Puer tea due to the unwillingness of the tea producers.
food. What was carried initially was mainly the very raw Puer tea, often made into a compressed form. There is a legend, which is being more and more taken as a truth by contemporary writers, especially writers in Yunnan, saying that Puer tea’s post-fermentation was accidentally discovered as a result of the caravan transport; the flavour of the tea was shaped by sunshine and rainfall, and Puer tea’s astringent feature was transformed into a mild taste (Su Fanghua 2002: 50; Mu Jihong 2004: 92; Zhou Hongjie 2004: 8). Another group of tea commentators, mainly from the Pearl River Delta, however, relate Puer tea’s post-fermentation to its storage. They argue that it is the Cantonese, whether in Guangdong or Hong Kong, that first discovered that Puer tea’s taste improved and turned mild after being stored for some years (He Jingcheng 2002: 118-125). It’s hard to judge which version is completely true, but it is clear that very little aged Puer tea can be found in present-day Yunnan, and in fact, many Yunnanese traders are obtaining it by buying it from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Although the origin of Puer tea’s mythical aged taste is unresolved, the Yunnanese are taking strategic action to shape Puer tea as a unique representation of Yunnan. In a sense, this is an echo of recent academic examination of the formation of “Yunnan” and its unique status in a global context. Throughout history, several indigenous regimes have existed in the area that now comprises Yunnan. These included the Dian Kingdom in the third century B.C., the powerful Nanzhao Kingdom in the mid-seventh century and the Dali Kingdom in the early tenth century. Although the Yuan Mongols’ conquest in 1253 initiated Yunnan’s incorporation into central regimes, many scholars stress that for a long time Yunnan had never really been fully incorporated but was made up of multiple independent or semi-independent local regimes that had closer relationships with neighboring Southeast Asian areas; nor were all the present lands of Yunnan called “Yunnan” (Giersch 2006; Hill 1998; Yang Bin 2006).

Although not emphasizing some of these “sensitive” political and ethnic issues like historians and other academics, the Yunnanese writers on Puer tea ask their audiences to pay close attention to Yunnan’s history in order to understand Puer tea. They highlight Yunnan’s essential role in the development of Puer tea by borrowing insights from academic research, stressing that Yunnan has never been isolated by high mountains or

---

11 Here I mean the Great Pearl River Delta, which includes Guangdong Province, Hong Kong and Macao. In all these regions the Cantonese are the majority of the population.

12 Besides these two opinions, there are also other views. For instance, some people say that storage was initially undertaken by tea producers in Yunnan, who could not sell their tea products and had to keep them for a long period (Ran Dianrong 2005a: 107).
tough roads, rather that it has long been closer to Southeast Asia in nature, economics, ethnicity and religion, and it has played important roles in communication and cultural exchange between India, Southeast Asia, inland China and the wider world (Mu Jihong 1992; Lei Pingyang 2000; Mu Jihong 2004; Ran Dianrong 2005a; Zou Jiaju 2005). Puer tea is selected by these tea writers as one of the very important goods that embodied Yunnan’s relative autonomy and its contribution to the world. The images of multiple ethnic groups in Yunnan, with their special costumes and customs, and the stories about the past tea caravans become two remarkable symbols used to represent Puer tea’s value and the unique status of Yunnan (Figure 0.8, 0.9 and 0.10). Notably, this shows a mystifying and complicating trend, in which Yunnan is described as a pure land as well as a mysterious place, and Puer tea is endowed with multiple values representing Yunnan’s rich culture.

Nevertheless, these voices also adopt a simplified method to deal with history and reality, in order to be consistent with the existing administrative organisation and government policy. In this regard, their voices become very Sino-centric. They look at all the existing land in the province originally as incontrovertible parts of Yunnan, and also essentially a part of China. While they stress that Yunnan has multiple ethnic groups and multiple cultures, they also make it clear that Yunnan is a “united” province of China, ignoring the complex historical facts about Yunnan’s formation.

Figure 0.8: Lahu people under their tea trees in Menghai Xishuangbanna. They are wearing traditional costumes because the local government was launching a tea event in March 2007.
Figure 0.9: “Hani Puer tea” sold at the 2007 Simao tea trade fair.

Figure 0.10: A display of a tea caravan at the 2007 Kunming tea trade fair.
Transformation and the Desire to Balance

How is Puer tea endowed with so many symbolic meanings at a certain moment? In what social context is its recent popularity generated? The answers I present in this thesis can be summarized in two statements: first, these symbolic meanings are strategically inherited from those applied to Chinese tea over a long period of time; second, and more importantly, the construction and application of these symbolic meanings is taking place at a particular moment of China’s transformation in various aspects such as politics, economics and people’s concept of value. The Puer tea fad symbolically represents people’s multiple desires in this period of transformation, which has forged contrast and contest between the past and the present, between different places and between different actors.

Anthropologists and sociologists explore people’s attitudes towards food from diverse perspectives. One of the most important approaches is to explore the symbolic meanings of food by linking it to issues of identity. Since the work of Lévi-Strauss (1970), there has been attention to the fact that food is not only good to eat but also good for thinking. In particular, Lévi-Strauss developed the binary distinction between the raw and the cooked, stressing that artificial interference is the key factor that transforms food from the natural to the cultural. This is a very general description of the symbolic constructing of meanings, and I will later show that the case of Puer tea sometimes differs from Lévi-Strauss’ general scheme.

The symbolic meanings of food have been explored in many different directions. Some have considered the role of food in religious contexts, as a certain food can become an obvious marker of a certain religion (Toomey 1994; Feeley-Harnik 1995). Some stress that food plays an important role in memory because it can fully wake up one’s senses to remember home or the past (Seremetakis 1994; Sutton 2001). Some attribute different styles of food consumption to divergent taste interests and different class positions (Goody 1982; Bourdieu 1984). Some look at how food has been taken as one inevitable part in tourism to signify different travel “flavours” (Heldke 2005; Germann-Molz 2004). Some discuss food customs from the point of view of gender, urging people to consider why throughout history certain ways of food consumption are considered as masculine or feminine (Counihan and Kaplan 1998). Some have also explored how food is tied to ethnicity and used to represent distinct ethnic identities.
even with spatial and temporal change (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Tam 2002). Chinese food has always formed a particularly rich subject for anthropologists and historians to explore how unique Chinese concepts are embodied in food and how certain types of imported food are locally reinterpreted (Anderson 1980, 1988; Watson 1997; Wu and Cheung 2002; Su Heng-an 2004; Sterckx 2005).

In particular I want to mention the work by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), who writes about the Japanese using rice as “metaphors of self.” She argues that the symbolic meanings developed for a certain staple food, like rice for the Japanese, are the sediments of “historical process.” Over a long period of time these meanings are “naturalized” and become “natural” to the people of the nation (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993: 6). As Ohnuki-Tierney notes, although it has become the dominant representation for the nation, rice is not necessarily quantitatively important to all Japanese and in fact there are large portions of the Japanese population who don’t depend on rice to survive. Nor does she see the identification of the Japanese with rice as a conscious presentation. The customs and metaphors relevant to rice are merely applied by the general population in their daily lives. This is different to the consciously symbolized and abstracted meanings developed by cultural interpreters such as anthropologists (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993: 5).

In many aspects, the case of tea in China matches Ohnuki-Tierney’s views. Its symbolic meanings have developed over a long period and have become naturalized in China’s history. Tea has become the exclusive national drink of China, though it’s not actually consumed by the entire population, either. It is regarded as far more than a drink to quench thirst. In ordinary people’s lives, it is served to guests for hospitality and it is essential in managing social relations. It is commonly used as a gift for respected people, especially during festivals. In the past, many Chinese people used it as a betrothal gift during wedding negotiations. Tea is also used as a negotiating media between the mundane and the sacred, for instance it is one of the important offerings during ancestor worship rituals. Indigenous ethnic groups in Yunnan, such as the Hani, actually worship tea trees and don’t allow them to be destroyed at random (Shi Junchao 1999; Xu Jianchu 2007).

However, whereas Ohnuki-Tierney argues that the symbolic meanings of rice have been mainly unconsciously developed in Japanese daily lives, the literati in China has played
a role in consciously highlighting the cultural importance of tea, like the French
gentry’s role in boosting the status of French cuisine (Ulin 1996; Ferguson 1998). Tea
drinking is linked by the literati to other forms of art such as poetry, calligraphy and
painting, and it is represented as typifying a frugal, pure and elegant lifestyle (Shen
Dongmei 2007). Many ancient landscape paintings situate the characters in nature with
tea drinking indicating a desire to escape from political disputes and enjoy freedom in a
self-constructed utopia (Figure 0.11 and 0.12).

Figure 0.11: *Lu Yu Peng Cha Tu* [The painting of Lu Yu brewing Tea]. A painting by Zhao Yuan from
the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368). Source: Nipic Website (2010).

Figure 0.12: *Pincha Tu* [The painting of tea tasting]. A painting by Wen Zhengming from the Ming
Tea is also linked by the literati to important forms of Chinese religion. Essays and poems often give tea a colour of frugality, being consistent with the concept of benevolence and moderation in Confucianism. In the fourth century, frugal tea banquets began to be advocated as alternatives to the luxurious alcohol banquet, and tea was taken as a sober drink in contrast to alcohol which often led to disorder (Guan Jianping 2001). Chinese tea was also promoted for its medicinal functions: refreshing the mind, advancing digestion, lowering the hot feature of the body and promoting urination. These functions were further promoted by the Daoist idea of “nourishing life” (yangsheng, 养生), the way of improving one’s health via proper eating and also thinking. Tea also became important in temples, where Buddhist monks drank it to refresh their mind and assist them in meditation. A saying came into being: cha chan yi wei (茶禅一味), literally tea and Ch’an Buddhism have the same flavour (Benn 2005).

Nevertheless, I find that it is not always easy to differentiate between the metaphoric meanings of tea used by folk audiences and those used by the cultural elites. Quite often it is from the former that the latter develops its further insights, and then these insights flow back into popular culture and they become mixed up. That’s why many ordinary Chinese also believe that tea drinking brings about good order and enjoyment. So, the symbolic meanings of tea in China are actually generated by both conscious and unconscious representations, and naturalized by the strength of contributions from both folk and elite culture.

Furthermore, I want to pay more particular attention to the uneven segments in this historical process, namely the variation, contrast, transformation and subversion in the process of symbolic identification, and the counter forces that challenge the established symbolic meanings. Chinese symbolic identification with tea has not always naturally or steadily developed throughout history. It has developed unevenly at particular times and been very much shaped by political and economic pressures and social demands. Before and after the reform era, the profile of tea in China was quite different. During the time of Mao (1949-1976), the profile of tea was suppressed by the exclusive emphasis on political struggle, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In this period living standards were low (Figure 0.13) and many things relevant to consumption were condemned as “negative capitalism” (ziben zhuyi weiba, 资本主义尾巴) (see also Zeng Zhixian 2001: 93). The positive meanings of tea were buried, public tea houses were greatly reduced in number and tea consumption was largely limited to the
family and work unit. The reform era, which formally started in the early 1980s, saw a gradual elevation of living standards. Various forms of entertainments were encouraged especially after the mid 1990s when China began its economic surge. Entering the twenty-first century, the so-called consumption revolution has become more intensely staged (Davis 2000; Latham, Thompson, and Klein 2006). Tea is once again stressed as an essential national representation. All sorts of tea events like tea auctions, tea serving performances and tea tasting competitions, have sprung up and these are often elevated to the status of art. These events reflect an extraordinary craze for tea culture in contemporary China (D'Abbs 2009). In Kunming, one survey reveals that by the end of 2006 there were a total of 4,000 wholesale, retail and service tea units, which forms a huge contrast to the very low profile of public tea services in the Mao era.\(^\text{13}\) It is exactly in this context of transformation that Yunnan's Puer tea has become popular. Remarkably, all the current tea houses in Kunming are mainly selling Puer tea, a tea consumed by Yunnanese in the past, but unknown for its aged value.

\[\text{Figure 0.13: China's GDP Per Capita (1955-2005). Source: NBSC (2009).}\]

\(^{13}\) This survey was undertaken by the Promotion Association of Kunming Ethnic Tea Culture and the Long-Run Puer Tea Institution of Yunnan Agricultural University (Yunnan Daily 2006c).
The present cultural packaging of Puer tea has inherited and borrowed many elements from the packaging of Chinese tea more generally. For example, popular writers on Puer tea argue that Puer tea is the only one that is still “keeping the legacy of Tang and Song,” as it still keeps the compressed form of tea (Lei Pingyang 2000: 1-3; Deng Shihai 2004: 24). The other remarkable saying about Puer tea’s merit is linked to time. It is said that a piece of Puer tea won’t be good until it has been aged for a long time by means of a natural process, whether along the caravan route or quietly put into storage, just like a man won’t be mature and wise until he has had enough life experience (Li Yan and Yang Zejun 2004; Ran Dianrong 2005b). Hence some writers and drinkers declare that the superior Puer tea is the naturally aged kind, which echoes the Daoist approach that appreciates spontaneity and the flavourless flavour (wu wei zhi wei, 无味之味) (Deng Shihai 2004: 49).

Whether being related to individual identity, or being used for Yunnanese group identity, these symbolic meanings of Puer tea are consciously constructed. On the one hand they look strange because of the confusions that many Yunnanese have about them, especially the sudden appreciation for aged taste. They haven’t existed “naturally” for long, and haven’t been widely accepted. Rather they have been “artificially” created by a group of advocates in only about five years. The rapid emergence of Puer tea’s aged value is almost like cooking a fast food, although ironically Puer tea supporters stress that good Puer tea is shaped by the slow procedure of aging. Other studies have also suggested that such rapid invention of food ways is happening both in China (Kyllo 2007) and in other counties of the world (Haverluk 2002; Hsü Ching-wen 2005), while the uniqueness of Puer tea’s case lies in the unprecedented depth of its packaged values as well as the widespread counter forces that unpack and deconstruct the newly established values.

On the other hand, these consciously constructed meanings for Puer tea do reveal a certain kind of “historical process” based on contrast. When put on a historical timeline, these newly constructed meanings form so obvious a contrast to the past meanings that it no doubt proves that meanings attached to Puer tea have developed at specific points in China’s historical development. Just like the Japanese use of rice as a self metaphor.

---

14 In fact, several other kinds of dark tea are also produced in compressed form, such as those produced in Human and Sichuan for export to Tibet and Mongolia.
15 See chapter 63 of Dao De Jing [Tao Te Ching]: “It acts without action, does without doing, finds flavor in what is flavorless” (Lao Tzu and Waley 1998: 132-133).
is “born through discourse with the other” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993: 8), the packaging of Puer tea’s symbolic value has happened in the context of reform China’s transformation. New meanings are constructed through discourse and contrast with the historical past.

In relation to this temporal discourse, the consumers, situated in a context of transformation and adaptation, have strong desires to consume something new as well as something old in order to counter-balance the unforgettable past. First, there is a strong desire to become wealthy, to balance the poor past. Those who have become rich are eager to find an appropriate channel to invest. Puer tea, the “drinkable antique” valued for its aged taste, becomes a possibility. The amazing value of aged Puer tea makes people think that “you will regret it tomorrow if you don’t store it today.”

Second, there is the desire to live a healthy life, to achieve a physical balance for the body that had been neglected in the poor era. This echoes the consumption trend globally (Hollander 2003), and it contains special meanings in terms of the distinctive Chinese concepts that food is also medicine, and that eating is essential to balance yin and yang, cold and hot for the body (Anderson 1980; Belasco and Scranton 2002; Ismail 2002; Su Heng-an 2004). The advertising about Puer tea, that it is more effective than any other teas for helping with digestion, is widely accepted. Specifically, some consumers seek out Puer tea made from forest material due to its superior ecological, taste and health value. In both urban tea houses and rural production areas, people drink Puer tea before meals to stimulate the appetite, or drink it afterwards to deal with greasiness. It becomes hard to say whether they drink Puer tea in order to eat more, or eat more in order to drink Puer tea.

Third, there is the desire for an ancient feel (fugu, 复古). This desire is an attempt to balance the Maoist past that suppressed interest in collecting antiques. It also seeks to balance the ongoing modernity and globalization that makes many old things disappear. Among all the antiques, Puer tea is said to be “still alive” and it can still be consumed after a long period (Deng Shihai 2004: 34). This caters for the needs of the present generation to obtain something both old and new. It is what David E. Sutton calls the “commoditization of nostalgia” (Sutton 2001:163), and also conforms to David Lowenthal’s point that nostalgia has been created as an industry as a result of twentieth century tourism (Lowenthal 1985). Moreover, it also reflects the so called phenomenon
*wenhua re* (文化热), the culture fever, which has been sweeping China since the mid 1980s (Wang Jing 1996; Schein 2000).

Fourth and also generally, there is the desire to obtain authenticity, like authentic Puer tea, authentic identity, and authentic life style. This is an attempt to achieve distinct identification to balance the Maoist era that valued unification. In a sense this quest for authenticity reflects the trend for a new kind of individualism. It is also an attempt to balance the uncertainty brought by modernity. In particular, in order to find authentic Puer tea, it is thought that it is necessary to go to the rural tea mountains, which are unpolluted, quiet and slow paced, in contrast to the the polluted, noisy and fast pace of urban life. Like the “slow food movement” in Europe (Leitch 2003), aged Puer tea is taken as a “slow beverage,” used to counterbalance the rapid pace of modernity (Ran Dianrong 2005b; Zhu Xiaohua 2007). In this regard, authentic Puer tea is identified with an authentic life style; discovering authentic Puer tea represents one’s ability to achieve the life style that one really wants; authenticity is endowed with meanings of self-determination and freedom, and represents the desire to find certainty in the midst of uncertainty. In turn, the changeable and debatable authenticity of Puer tea reflects the lack of clarity and ambiguity about what sort of life style is most desirable. This corresponds to the arguments of anthropologists that the ways people construct biographies for things reflects the way that they construct their own identities; or, they construct their own identities with the constructed biographies of things; and the complex and conflicting biography of things reflects the uncertainty of people’s identity (Kopytoff 1986).

So in a period of transformation, the symbolic meanings of Puer tea are being packaged in order to counter-balance the impoverished past. There are symbols associated with Puer tea representing new nationalism, regionalism and individualism to counter-balance prior identities and ongoing globalization. There are also counter voices emerging to further counter-balance all these newly constructed “authentic” meanings. The packaging and un-packaging happens quickly. The contrast between these alternative voices raises questions as to how long some symbolic meanings on Puer tea can last, and leads to a series of paradoxical feelings about the production and consumption of Puer tea.
The Jianghu of Puer Tea and Handcrafted Authenticity

Despite people’s desire to find authentic things, fake Puer tea flourishes. A popular saying tells consumers that ninety percent of Puer tea in the market can’t be authentic. Although the provincial government has set a series of regulations, the so-called fake Puer tea, like other fake products in China, continues. Many people keep complaining that there is no clear and strong standard. At the same time many don’t seem to be seriously concerned about the lack of a standard, because they can still survive without it. Many of them, including tea experts, often comment that “the world of Puer tea is like a jianghu,” which refers to the chaotic situation of Puer tea. This light-hearted kind of comment was formally taken up by a magazine called Puer Jianghu that was established in April 2007. I once asked the chief editor about their goal. He answered that since there had been so many disputes on Puer tea, he would be happy if their magazine could contribute a bit more fun rather than solving any serious problems (Figure 0.14 and 0.15). The meanings of jianghu, historically and contextually, can explain how the world of Puer tea is woven by multiple actors, in which the authenticity of Puer tea is contextually packaged and counter-packaged.

The term jianghu (江湖) is literally translated as many rivers and lakes. Its deeper meaning goes beyond specific geographical features and refers to a non-governmental space, in a sense echoing James Scott’s (2009) description of Yunnan as part of “Zomia,” a region where people sought refuge from the power of the state. The early use of jianghu contained meanings about reclusion, exemplified by a citation on jianghu mentioned by the Han historian Sima Qian (145 B.C.–87 B.C.): “[After fulfilling his task, Fan Li resigned and] took a small boat, floating in the jianghu” (Chen Pingyuan 1997: 158). In this regard, jianghu is inhabited by hermits who share the same interest as those characters who are portrayed in landscape paintings drinking tea, both going beyond the political arena and enjoying “individual liberty given solace and substance by romantic fulfilment on the one hand and transmitted cultural practices on the other” (Hamm 2005: 137).
Figure 0.14: A page in the opening issue of *Puer Jianghu* (2007c). The original image is Lin Chong, the coach of 800,000 Imperial Guards in *The Water Margin* (see later for more information on this). Here his title is changed to “the coach of the Puer Jianghu.” The caption on the left says, “Puer is a Jianghu. No moon, no stars, but only full of the shadow of swords. Jianghu is not awful. What’s awful is uncertainty and wandering alone.”

Figure 0.15: A display of “Puer jianghu weapons.” They are actually all sorts of tea knives used to break up compressed Puer tea (*Puer Jianghu* 2007b).
More popularly, *jianghu* appears in Chinese martial arts fiction. Since the Tang Dynasty (seventh to ninth century) when martial arts fiction flourished, *jianghu* has been created as a utopia, that partially reflects reality, in which *xiake* (侠客), the Chinese knights-errant or wandering swordsmen, travel around, compete in martial arts (*kungfu*, 功夫), and go beyond the political control of the court to help the poor and the oppressed, though not declaring their direct defiance of the court (Liu 1967; Chen Pingyuan 1997; Jing Wendong 2003). While going beyond the court’s complexity, this *jianghu* of knights-errant has its own chaos, full of dangers and contests with battles occurring at inns, waterways, mountains, temples or deserts. This theme of *jianghu* is what most current people refer to when they mention “the *jianghu* of Puer tea.”

In some cases, *jianghu* becomes a space for actors like bandits who declare their tough resistance to authority, as exemplified in the famous novel *The Water Margin* in the fourteenth century. In that novel 108 heroes killed the devil, helped the poor, and established their own court to declare obvious noncooperation with the imperial court, although their leader hadn’t completely given up the wish of serving the emperor. More broadly *jianghu* is used for “every ‘marginal’ and dispossessed element in society” (Minford 1997: xxix), where there are actors like hermits, performers, knights-errant, beggars, bandits, fortune-tellers, secret societies and swindlers (Minford 1997; Liu Yanwu 2003). Briefly, it is a non-mainstream space, which contrasts to the space of the court.

All the above themes have been reinforced since the 1950s when martial arts fiction again flourished in Hong Kong, with Jin Yong (Louis Cha) as the most prominent writer. In his novels, the knight-errant is the dominant character in *jianghu*, but the boundary between the knight-errant and the hermit is sometimes blurred. The knights-errant who carry out heroic deeds often wish to retreat from the chaotic *jianghu* itself. Sometimes, a seemingly quiet hermit is actually a knight-errant with advanced martial arts.

In contemporary narratives, the term *jianghu* is increasingly used. For example, in a commentary on his documentary, *Jianghu*, which records the life of a song and dance troupe, the film director Wu Wenguang (1999) treats *jianghu* as a contrast to home.

---

16 At that time these stories were called legends (*chuangqi*, 传奇).
17 Although the martial arts fiction scholar Chen Pingyuan (1997) insists that *jianghu* refers to the space for knights-errant, who are different from bandits and hermits.
18 It is one of the so-called Four Classical Chinese Novels, composed by Shi Nai’an in the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties. Some include Luo Guanzhong as an additional author.
According to him, the song and dance actors were forced to leave their homeland and were "floating" in another kind of life full of risks and with obscure prospects.¹⁹ In this regard, jianghu is represented as a wandering space for ordinary people who leave their real native lands. For another example, if someone is called "lao jianghu" (老江湖, an old jianghu), it means he is a person who is world-wise and knows how to deal with complex situations very well.

The idea for me to borrow the concept jianghu, when writing about the space for Puer tea actors, came from many scenes that I witnessed during my fieldwork. Both in tea mountains and around tea tables, I saw various people "fighting" to use open or secret methods to identify whether the tea or the person in front of them was authentic or not. I couldn’t help associating this with the contests that occur in martial arts fiction, such as those acted out by Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee, even though the tea competitions seemed much more still. I also met many people expressing that they had become tired as a result of many debates surrounding Puer tea, and they wished to give up all the disputes and just sit down for a simple and authentic cup of Puer tea.

By reflecting upon these scenes, I found that there are some intrinsic features of jianghu that could be applied to the world of Puer tea. First, as a space between utopia and reality, jianghu can be a social world in which knights-errant accomplish romantic dreams, while it is also a society that is full of chaos and risks. It’s no wonder that in these novels cheating, poisoning and robbery happen so frequently in the world of jianghu. In the case of Puer tea, many instances of cheating and forgery have occurred, making the desire to find “authentic” Puer tea hard to accomplish. Just like the adventures of the knights-errant living in the jianghu, or of ordinary people leaving their homeland, the route to discover authentic Puer tea is often full of high risks and competition due to the complex image of Puer tea and the obscure relationships between people. The wish for a simple cup of tea reflects people’s anxiety about Puer tea’s authenticity and indicates a desire to retreat from these risks and competitions and become a hermit-like tea drinker.

Second, in the jianghu world of martial arts fiction, knights-errant could go beyond governmental influence and attempt to find a simple and “perfect” resolution for all kinds of problems: good or evil, right or wrong, all could be judged finally by matching

¹⁹ Wu is an independent documentary film maker and writer in China. For more information on his life and works, see Filmsea Website (2003).
功夫 skills against each other. That is, by going beyond the social hierarchy, one can decide one's own fate depending on one's personal skill, an ideal dreamed of by many Chinese when they feel that it is hopeless to count on formal authority (Chen Pingyuan 1997, 2002). Similar to this, facing the lack of clear regulations on Puer tea by the government, some people believe that the best way to know about authentic Puer tea and avoid being cheated is via direct and personal tasting. I am particularly referring to a group of tea producers, drinkers and traders who emerge in the contest for identifying Puer tea's authenticity and who are very proud of their own abilities to judge authentic Puer tea. One trader from Guangdong once said to me:

You don’t need to know exactly in what way a piece of Puer tea is planted, processed or traded. All can be discovered finally at the tea table. Whether or not too much fertilizer has been used, what level of tea material it is made of, which tea mountain it is from, and roughly how old it is, all can be determined by your tasting ability.

Attitudes like this made me feel that the spaces for Puer tea actors—whether in faraway tea mountains or in urban tea houses or on the tea web sites—all share similarities with the jianghu world for knights-errant. Both reflect a kind of contrast to the more standardized rules of the court or the elite in their emphasis on personal skills. Nevertheless, I'd stress that in Puer tea's case this is a subtle kind of noncooperation rather than a clear declaration of resistance to authority. What these actors are mostly opposed to are actually complex doctrines or definitions of Puer tea that are declared to be authoritative and scientific but in their opinion fail to help with distinguishing the authentic from the fake.

Third, the term jianghu hints that the essence of the society is based on the presence of various groups or clans whose disciplines are in debate and cannot be tolerated by each other. That is, each group has its own social space, its "own code of conduct," or its "own language and wisdom" (Minford 1997: xxix). You would be at risk or you would lose your sense of belonging if you entered the other's space without accepting their discipline. In the case of Puer tea, different groups have different tea palates; there is a divergence between the so-called "raw Puer tea group" (sheng cha pai, 生茶派) and the "artificially fermented Puer tea group" (shu cha pai, 熟茶派), the "Yiwu flavor group" and the "Menghai flavor group," the "Yunnan storage group" and the "Guangdong
storage group.” Each of them self-declares as the most authentic and does not tolerate the other. In a sense, this is rather like the taste divergence described by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) in his *Distinction* in which different consumption choices over food or clothes act as distinct cultural markers. What is different might be that the *jianghu* distinction doesn’t have the same strong emphasis on class hierarchy as that by Bourdieu. As James J. Y. Liu (1967: 4) points out, Chinese knights-errant should not be regarded as a distinct social class “but simply as men of strongly individualistic temperament.” Similarly Puer tea actors have a distinction that is not necessarily determined by class difference, but more out of different interests, mutual prejudice and indignation about certain “authoritative” instructions. Moreover, in *jianghu* there are generally two levels of distinction: one, the *jianghu* actors altogether form a distinction from authoritative powers by declaring themselves to be a non-mainstream group; two, they themselves have interior discrepancies in terms of different opinions among different disciplines. Even within one discipline there also exist suspicions, and there are open or secret battles.

So, by using the concept of *jianghu*, I want to show that multiple voices have complexly converged in Puer tea’s popularity, and there are always counter forces existing in between these voices. This makes the effort of “unifying” the *jianghu* of Puer tea (*yi tong jianghu*, 一统江湖), namely giving Puer tea a singular authenticity, ultimately unsuccessful. Such multiple voices and counter forces have long existed in China. This thesis aims to explore this social and cultural continuity on the one hand, and on the other to display the unprecedented depth of a certain commodity’s contested fashioning in the context of reform China’s consumption revolution. The *jianghu* voices and counter forces will be illustrated at various spatial levels and in different circles of actors who debate and contest as well as negotiate and cooperate in identifying Puer tea’s authenticity. Generally this can be seen to be a battle between the voices that attempts to package Puer tea within a “perfect” profile, especially for symbolizing certain forms of local nationalism, and the counter forces that unpack its popularity and deconstruct its “perfect” meanings. Sometimes the measuring of Puer tea’s authenticity takes place at a small production place between a local tea producer and an outside trader, or at a consumption site between several teadrinkers. Sometimes the *jianghu* narrative moves to a higher geographical level, with competition between multiple sub-districts in Yunnan to grab the “original” honour of producing Puer tea, or the debate
between Yunnan itself and the other consumption regions on who owns the more authentic traditions of Puer tea.

These multiple voices and counter forces are situated in a context where the state has joined in the authenticating process but hasn’t been able to efficiently supervise all aspects of production and consumption. According to some producers and traders, this has created added burdens and risks on the jianghu of Puer tea. As a result of the state’s inability to clearly regulate Puer tea, an arena has developed in which multiple jianghu actors express their own voices and find their own solutions, just like the knights-errant who rely on their personal martial arts to survive in the jianghu.

Mayfair Yang’s (1988; 1989; 1994) research on gift economy is comparable on this point. She invites us to rethink the positive aspects of the gift economy in reform China, rather than simply considering it as reflecting bureaucratic corruption. Her research since the 1980s provides rich cases to show that the gift economy in China has actually become an alternative means of distribution and even an important supplement to the state’s distributive and redistributive economy. Furthermore, socializing through gift exchange—known as guanxi—is read by her as being an unofficial order that reflects the power from the “popular realm” (minjian), as being both oppositional and complementary to that of the state (Yang 1994). Likewise, many ways generated by ordinary Puer tea producers, traders and consumers to self-define Puer tea’s authenticity have become important supplements, as well as a sort of subtle resistance, to governmental regulation. In this regard, such self-help is conducted not simply because the actors are compelled to do so, but because it is useful in terms of its effect.

Although these jianghu actors also appeal to the state for clearer and stronger regulation, in actuality, once clearer regulation emerges, alternative voices emerge to draw Puer tea back to its vague state. The key excuse for retaining the vagueness, which I have collected from many tea producers, traders and drinkers during my fieldwork, is that only one’s personal experiences, especially sensory techniques, can be relied upon to differentiate quality; scientific standards cannot cope with Puer tea’s changeable features, but only make the process of tea appreciation boring. Therefore, the problem is not just that governmental regulation is not clear or strong enough, but there is also uncertainty about whether this tea culture needs such clear and strong standardization.

---

20 Besides Mayfair Yang, other important research on gift and guanxi, mainly in rural areas, has been done by Yan Yunxiang (1996) and Andrew Kipnis (1997).
This preference for non-standardization is most obviously exemplified by the so-called strictest standards on Puer tea’s authenticity that are agreed upon by many jianghu actors: the very authentic Puer tea should be the raw kind made with tea material from a single origin, from a good ecological environment, nicely handcrafted, traded via negotiating with small-scale family units, and stored for a long period of natural fermentation. According to this view, the authenticity of Puer tea does not come from mechanization or standardization, but should be judged personally, contextually and flexibly, and thus it is handcrafted authenticity rather than anything else. It is empirical, flexible, and also vague.

While examining the process of how a substance is fashioned, this thesis suggests that it is more important to look at the other side, namely how its fashioned value is counter-packaged by multiple forces. The multiple voices, counter forces and “handcrafted” standard on authenticity, I argue, are shaped by the intrinsic features of Chinese jianghu culture, and are significant in understanding the chaotic phenomenon of Puer tea in the early twenty-first century of China.

There’s a popular question and answer about jianghu that best explains how handcrafted authenticity is produced: when one asks where jianghu is located; it’s answered that it lies in the human heart (jianghu zai nali; jianghu zai renxin, 江湖在哪里？江湖在人心). Here jianghu refers to the space of authentic things. If paraphrased according to Puer tea’s case, it could be: whether a piece of Puer tea is authentic or not depends upon whether the seller has a kind heart, whether the buyer thinks the tea is good, and how strong the relationship between the buyer and the seller is.

Outline of Thesis Structure

This thesis will trace Puer tea’s “cultural biography”—taking a term from Arjun Appadurai (1986) who proposes examining the politics linking a commodity’s value and exchange to its detailed social biography—from Yunnan to the outside, from multiple rural production sites to multiple urban consumption areas. One of my main research sites was Yiwu, a township in Xishuangbanna Yunnan, whose history of producing Puer tea epitomizes the packaging and un-packaging process of all Puer tea in Yunnan. Sometimes the narrative shifts to Menghai and Simao, two other important production places in Yunnan. I shift to these places when there were special events
relating to Puer tea, and in particular when these multiple production sites competed over the authentic origin of Puer tea. The other main research site is Kunming, the most important distribution and consumption place for Puer tea in southwest China. I also took opportunities to make short visits to Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Taiwan, where the consumption of Puer tea has had a major impact on Yunnan. While following the trajectory of Puer tea, I also followed the trajectory of the persons who traded Puer tea. Therefore, some actors that appear in rural tea fields collaborating and competing with the locals also appear in urban tea houses, where they drink tea and debate about Puer tea’s authentic taste.

Following these actors’ journeys from the rural to the urban, and following Puer tea’s rise and fall in 2007, I structure the chapters in this thesis in four parts: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. The seasonal theme has been inspired by other writings on tea (Huang Anxi 2004) and Chinese consumption culture (Brook 1998). Specifically, I have developed the framework from the concept in Chinese medical science and Daoism that one needs to “nourish life” (yangsheng, 养生) in appropriate ways in different seasons: sprouting in spring (chun sheng, 春生), growing up in summer (xia zhang, 夏长), harvesting as well as withdrawal in autumn (qiu shou, 秋牧), storing and hiding in winter (dong cang, 冬藏).

In both the Spring and Summer parts of the thesis, there are two sides to Puer tea’s story. One is its “progress story” (Dupuis 2002: 3), in which Puer tea is perfected, packaged and mystified; the other is its “downfall story” (Dupuis 2002: 4), in which it is unperfected, unpacked and demystified. The narratives of Spring are from Yiwu, where the tea leaves bloomed and tea trade boomed. Chapter 1 provides an introduction about Yiwu. It argues that it is the flexibly imagined standards on originality, co-developed by non-locals and locals, which shape Yiwu’s authentic status in relation to Puer tea. Chapter 2 explores the ongoing pressures on farmers and traders, including a new modern production regulation, the unexpected rising tea price and fierce competition, and also the difficulties in negotiating the social relations. The contested desires, multiple voices and counterforces, I argue, are crucial in understanding the risk, counterfeiting, and authenticity anxiety in the tea mountains of Yiwu when its tea economy boomed.
In Summer the view shifts to the provincial level. In Chapter 3, I examine how Puer tea’s value was heated up by multiple administrative levels of government in Yunnan, who used Puer tea to represent their regional images. This effort failed, as I show in Chapter 4, when Puer tea became a target for speculation and the state’s effort in authenticating Puer tea was challenged and unpacked. The multiple desires and cultural debates surrounding Puer tea resulted in the impossibility of defining a singular origin for Puer tea, and these multiple desires and cultural debates had pre-determined the fate of Puer tea from its rise to its fall.

In Autumn I return to Yiwu, where the locals were worrying about the recession in the Puer tea market. In Chinese literature, there has long been the theme of “lament for autumn” (bei qiu, 悲秋), embodied by Song Yu’s initial works in the third century B.C: “Alas for the breath of autumn! Wan and drear! Flowers and leaf fluttering fall and turn to decay. Sad and lorn…” (Hawkes 1957: 92). In Chapter 5, in a reflexive mode, I further “unpack” Puer tea, to show how its value had been changed back and forth in the production area. In Chapter 6, I examine how the locals dealt with some of their anxieties by transforming the acquired regulations on Puer tea into practical and localized forms.

Winter is set in the urban tea houses of Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, where Puer tea drinkers discussed the relationship between storage and Puer tea’s taste. In Chapter 7, through showing how taste judgement was inevitably influenced by the inter-personal atmosphere in the tea house, I argue that interactional social spaces, rather than any personal techniques or innate palate, remain the core factor that shapes the authenticity of things in Chinese society. Chapter 8 continues the narratives of tea tasting and explores how temporal and spatial contrasts have deeply shaped Puer tea’s changeable social biography, which contains endless counter forces.

Film is used as an important methodology to trace Puer tea’s “social life.” On the one hand, the attached film sections on DVD 1 and DVD 2 are used to illustrate the landscapes of tea processing and people’s sensory experiences in tea tasting. The icon is placed in certain sections of the thesis to suggest that readers look at the relevant sections of film or stills presentations either before or after reading the marked section of text. On the other hand, rather than completely paralleling the text’s narratives, the films are edited with their own clues and themes. For instance, several film sections are
separately based upon the lives of different family tea producers and traders, whose details haven’t been explored deeply in the texts. In this sense, the film would provide alternative narratives about Puer tea, in consistence with the theme of jianghu that has multiple voices and alternative resolutions.
Spring

Figure 1.0: Spring tea buds in Yiwu.
Chapter 1 “The Authentic Tea Mountain Yiwu”

...our Puer tea is made of the tender fragrant tea leaves, topped with the refined tea buds of the Authentic Tea Mountain Yiwu...Recently fake Puer tea emerges; counterfeits increase; the fake mix with the authentic, which is hard to identify. Some shameless persons counterfeit our brand to gain profit. To forestall such bad effects, we have changed our brand icon to two lions since August 1920. Please notice our special description ticket and avoid being cheated. (Text on the label of Tongqing Puer tea, Yiwu, in the 1920s or 1930s. See Figure 1.1)

...our tea is of original flavor, original taste, and from an original environment. It is processed in a handcrafted way and is a healthy green drink. After natural fermentation, it will become mellower: the longer the storage, the better the taste (Text on the label of the Zheng family’s Puer tea, Yiwu, in 2007).1

Aged Puer Tea

In January 2007 I passed through Hong Kong, on my way from Australia to Yunnan. The saying that Puer tea “is produced in Yunnan, stockpiled in Hong Kong and collected in Taiwan” encouraged me to stay in Hong Kong for a few days (watch Film 1 on DVD 1 before or after reading this section ■).

While I was in Hong Kong, I was strongly suggested by many people to go to a famous tea restaurant—Lianxiang Lou (莲香楼)—for yum cha, where various kinds of dim sum were served.2 Puer tea was the tea predominantly chosen by the customers. When eating shaomai, a steamed pork dumpling, Matthew, a local Cantonese, mentioned to me, “Now you can understand why Hong Kong people must drink Puer tea. If not, these foods would be too greasy to digest. With Puer tea, people can eat more and stay here longer.”

Some days later, Eddie, another local friend, showed me his personal store of Puer tea produced in different periods. The oldest ones, to my surprise, were very well known and high quality aged Puer: one was branded as Tongqing Hao (同庆号, Hao means brand), with two lions as the icon; the other was Songpin Hao (宋聘号), with its own good luck picture (Figure 1.1 and 1.2). I had only ever seen these types of tea in collectors’ books about aged Puer tea (see Deng Shihai 2004: 325-326). Eddie brought

---

1 These are my translations. I’ll note in the thesis if I use others’ translations.
2 yum cha is a traditional type of Cantonese cuisine, consisting of dim sum and tea, usually eaten for breakfast. Dim sum refers to the snack-like food, such as steamed or fried dumplings.
these two kinds of tea and accompanied me to visit a famous tea house in Hong Kong. There we drank them with Mr. Ye, the master of the tea house, who had a rich knowledge of tea.

These two pieces of tea were highly appreciated there. The waitresses could not help pausing in their work and gathering around. Mr. Ye personally infused the tea very carefully. He had tasted many kinds of aged Puer tea before. He commented that there was a sort of sweetness bubbling up from the depth of his throat soon after tasting the Tongqing Puer tea, like sugar, though more natural than sugar. He described its taste as feeling like a blossom in the mouth. But he said it was still a little acerbic and could be stored for some more years. He gave higher praise to the Songpin Puer tea. This kind of Puer tea, he said, worked exactly like an ancient food commentator has described excellent tea: your arrogance is eliminated; your impatience is removed; your mood is elevated; your temper is softened (ping jin shi zao; yi qing yue xing. 平矜释躁，怡情悦性).³

We talked about the tea’s life history. Eddie told us that he got both pieces from an old Cantonese man. This old man bought them very early (Eddie was not sure when) in Guangdong and later his family migrated from Hong Kong to Australia. Eddie met the old man in Sydney, Australia in 1997, and was gifted several pieces of Puer tea by him as “useless relics.”

Although it was hard to identify exactly what year the tea was produced, Eddie and Mr. Ye agreed that the date was no later than the mid 1930s. That is, both pieces of tea were at least 70 years old! And according to their aged taste and trademark, they probably came from Yiwu, one of the Six Great Tea Mountains in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan. The tea producers of seventy years ago had good brand awareness. In order to distinguish their tea from counterfeits, they used special icons, such as the lions and the good luck motif, to identify their own family products made in a particular period. Furthermore, these icons were used to represent Puer tea originating from “the authentic tea mountain Yiwu” rather than anywhere else (Yiwu zheng shan, 易武正山. zheng means authentic or original; shan means mountain). The tea production master put the Chinese character zheng (正) in the tea description to remind consumers of its authenticity. Such aged Puer tea, however, never appeared in my later fieldwork in Yiwu.

³ Yuan Mei (1761- 1797). Suiyuan shidan (Recipes from the Sui Garden) (Yuan Mei 1792).
Figure 1.1: Label of Tongqing Puer tea.

Figure 1.2: Label of Songpin Puer tea.

Figure 1.3: “Red Seal” (Hongyin) Puer tea.

Figure 1.4: “Green Seal” (Lüyin) Puer tea.

The marked prices in Figure 1.3 and 1.4 were in Singapore dollars. They were on sale in a store in Singapore in December 2007 (S$1 = US$0.57 ≈ 4 RMB at that time). According to Puer tea guide books, they are at least 40 to 60 years old.
In the past ten years, the price of aged Puer tea had increased a great deal. I was told by informants in Hong Kong and Taiwan that in the 1980s, when connoisseurs began noticing its value, one piece (usually 357 grams) was sold for less than 1000 RMB; then it reached over 10,000 RMB in the 1990s; after 2002 one piece was once traded for over one million RMB! It’s no surprise that some tea connoisseurs like to say that “one piece of consuming results in one piece of loss” (see also Figure 1.3 and 1.4). This aged and valuable Puer tea was established as an ideal paradigm that urged connoisseurs to march towards its place of origin. Like some other commodities, such as French wine (Ulin 1996; Guy 2003) and chocolate (Terrio 2005), Puer tea’s initial blooming had relied very much on the role of connoisseurship. While heading towards the authentic tea mountain of Yiwu, the connoisseurs also initiated a series of standards on the authenticity of Yiwu’s raw Puer tea. These standards were then further developed by traders, tourists, writers, media reporters and also locals, and they finally co-packaged an “authentic” image of Yiwu.

**Historical Glory**

Yiwu is a township under Mengla County of the Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture in southern Yunnan (Figure 0.2 and 1.5). It is located on the east bank of the Mekong River, close to the border of Laos. The township covers a mountainous region of 864 square kilometers. Its population of about 13 thousand, is made up of 34 percent Han and 66 percent other ethnic groups, officially recognized as Yi (29 percent), Yao (21 percent) and Dai (16 percent) (YTG 2007).

Prior to tasting the aged Puer tea in Hong Kong I had been to Yiwu twice. The first time was in 2002, when I happened to be there with a film crew, but I only stayed for one day. The crew was making a film about people in Yunnan relevant to tea. The second time was in early 2006, when I went for one week, and with a clearer aim to observe it as a future fieldwork area. What struck me most during those two early journeys were two things: the unique way of shaping Puer tea in a caked form by hand and using the weight of a grindstone; and the typical Han style of aged family houses surrounded by rural scenes. And the two were linked very well, since the tea is processed in the old houses.
Apart from my own observations, more knowledge came to me initially from Zhang Yi, the retired leader of Yiwu Township, who had taken the lead in reviving the hand-shaped Puer tea in the mid 1990s after Puer tea had been silent in Yiwu for almost half a century.

Having worked on local chronicles, Zhang was so familiar with the history of Yiwu that in 2002 he was invited by the film crew to act as a guide. Following him into the aged houses, I heard stories about the family histories bound up with Puer tea production and trade of many years ago. All these stories were recounted by Mr. Zhang and other locals in Shiping accent, a Yunnanese dialect. According to their versions of local history, from the mid-seventeenth to the eighteenth century, many Han migrated to Yiwu and the nearby regions from Shiping, a southeastern county in Yunnan (Zhang Yi 2006b: 72-73; see also Zhang Yingpei 2006: 77). Before the arrival of Han, the indigenous ethnic group, unofficially recognized as *ben ren* (本人), had been cultivating tea trees, usually under the authority of Dai overlords. At present, *ben ren* is identified by the authorities as Yi. Some researchers think that this ethnic group is actually close to Bulang (Mu Jihong 2004: 63). Some argue that it is closer to Hani (Gao Fachang 2009:
29). In reality, many non-Han people in the area say their ancestors were *ben ren*, but they call themselves Yi in accordance with the official classification.\(^4\)

According to one piece of research, before the Han arrived, there had been at least 5,000 mu of tea lands being cultivated by the indigenous ethnic group (Zhang Yingpei 2006: 75-77). The Han immigrants gradually acquired rights to land. By making use of obsolete areas, clearing new areas, or buying land from the Dai aristocrats, they developed their own tea plantations and came to rely on tea as an important part of their economy.\(^5\) Remarkably some gained tea land through intermarriage with local Dai aristocrats (Dao Yongming 1983: 61; Liu Minjiang 1983: 57-58; Hill 1989: 332; Jiang Quan 2006: 37; Zhang Yi 2006a: 12). Under the efforts of both the Han migrants and the original groups, the area of tea cultivation increased. After rough production by tea growers, the loose tea material was compulsively traded to the Han merchants who established commercial tea companies, organized fine production for pressing the tea material into caked forms, and finally traded the products (Liu Minjiang 1983: 57; field interviews). According to recent research by Puer tea experts based upon examining examples of old tea and the genealogies of tea producers, many commercial brands, such as *Tongqing Hao*, were established by Han families in Yiwu in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries (Deng Shihai 2004: 82; Zhang Yingpei 2006: 122-123). Puer tea made in Yiwu and the nearby mountains entered into a buoyant commercial period and became very famous. At that time Yiwu, together with the nearby tea mountains, presented a prosperous scene. According to one writer from 1799, “hundreds of thousands of people came to trade in the tea mountains” (*ru shan zuo cha zhe shu shiwan ren*, 入山作茶者数十万人) (Tan Cui 1981 [1799]: 387). Contemporary writers have reproduced these images with excitement and nostalgia:

> From the very south to the very north along the 100 kilometers of the Yiwu tea mountain, there were full of tea gardens being connected. Everywhere there were tea; everywhere there were thriving villages; traders and travelers came and left without pausing; the caravan horses spread the sound of their

\(^4\) Some people call themselves Xiangtang (香堂), but they are also officially recognized as Yi.

\(^5\) It's not completely clear to me when exactly the Han became involved in the cultivation of tea. Some records say that the Han joined in tea cultivation in Yiwu soon after their migration. Some recount these events without mentioning the exact date. More definitely, from the time the Han migrated to Yiwu up until about 1900, tea cultivation and rough production mostly belonged to the indigenous ethnic groups. And as I shall show soon, the Han mostly organized fine production in commercial companies and participated in trade.
bells along the roads. Everywhere there showed prosperity (Zhang Yingpei 2006: 77).

Temples were built in the villages; stone roads were paved; Si he yuan [the typical Han style of family house] stood up... Outsiders who came to work on tea production, trade, transport, spread all over the villages and streets. During busy season, everyday there were more than one thousand horses/mules/cows gathering in the Six Great Tea Mountains to collect and distribute tea. Meanwhile foodstuffs, daily uses and other precious medicines were carried in (Zhang Yi 2006b: 73).

The trading networks of Yiwu’s Puer tea extended in several important directions: to Beijing, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and Tibet (see Figure 0.1).  

Now, after many years of vicissitude, along the old street of Yiwu there still stand aged family houses that had been famous as commercial tea companies in the past. Some houses are still occupied by the descendants; some have been transferred to new owners; and some houses have been destroyed with only the stories remaining. The houses of Tongqing and Songpin, whose Puer tea I encountered in Hong Kong, had disappeared. When I was with the film crew in 2002, our guide Zhang Yi was keen to take us to one well preserved house. It used to have a famous brand: Cheshun Hao (车顺号). From some rough tea material piled on the ground of the parlor, an old dusty wooden brand was taken out. The film crew took a shot of the brand, for which they were charged 10 RMB by the master, the descendant of Cheshun Hao. Four words were inscribed on the brand: Rui Gong Tian Chao (瑞贡天朝), “tribute to the emperor.” The brand declares that this family sent Puer tea as tribute to the emperors of the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912). It was granted to them in return. As pointed out by Zhang Yi and other local people, this was the highest honor of Yiwu’s Puer tea (Figure 1.6 and 1.7).

6 For the western academic accounts about the caravan routes between Yunnan and other Southeast Asian regions, see Andrew Forbes (1987), Ann Maxwell Hill (1998), Chiranan Prasertkul (1989). There is also a rich scholarship in Chinese on these routes, see Lei Pingyang (2000), Mu Jihong (1992; 2003), Liu Qinjin (2005).
Figure 1.6 and 1.7: Copied tribute tea brands were hung both on the front door and in the living room of Cheshun Hao in 2007.
Including Yiwu there are altogether six connected tea areas located east of the Mekong in Xishuangbanna. They are called “the Six Great Tea Mountains” (liu da cha shan, 六大茶山): Yiwu, Yibang, Manzhuan, Gedeng, Mangzhi and Youle. According to Zhang Yingpei (2006: 5), the first record about the Six Great Tea Mountains is by Li Shi (1988: 1) in his Xu Bo Wu Zhi, which tells that the Six Great Tea Mountains had been one of the main tea producing areas of Yunnan since the Tang Dynasty in the seventh century. There are several versions about the Six Great Tea Mountains: for instance, in some literature, Yiwu is replaced by Mansa; or there is no Mangzhi (Jiang Quan 2006; Zhao Zhichun 1988).

Apart from Youle, which belongs to Jinghong, all the other tea mountains are under Mengla County (Figure 1.8). The fame of these tea mountains is linked to the tribute tea sent to the Qing emperor in Beijing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Six Great Tea Mountains used to be under the control of the Dai ruler of Jinghong, the indigenous regime in Xishuangbanna. Later the Qing administration gradually extended its control into this area, conquered local officials and replaced them with imperial bureaucrats, known as gai tu gu liu (改土归流, literally replacing tusi with imperial officials). A new Puer Prefecture of Qing China was established in 1729, with Puer as its capital. At that time the east bank of the Mekong was removed from Dai control and added to Puer Prefecture. Shortly after the Six Great Tea Mountains became the base for tribute tea to Beijing (1732-1904) (Giersch 2006; Zhang Yingpei 2006). The oldest known Puer tea, the “Golden Melon Tribute Tea” (jin gua gong cha, 金瓜贡茶) found in the Palace Museum in Beijing (now kept in the Chinese Tea Institution in Hangzhou) (see Figure 3.5), gave a high profile to the Six Great Tea Mountains, because the tea material originated in Yibang, which was also inhabited by ben ren, Dai and Han migrants (Zhang Yingpei 2006:109). The Golden Melon tribute tea was produced more than one hundred years ago. Yibang was the political, administrative and tea trading center of the Six Great Tea Mountains from the 1750s until the early 1900s. After Yibang’s decline, Yiwu subsequently grew up in the early 1900s and became the production and distribution centre for Puer tea (Zhang Yingpei 2006: 11-14).
**Figure 1.8:** A sketch map of the Six Great Tea Mountains drawn by Zhang Yingpei. I have added the English labels.

**Figure 1.9:** Luo Deshou, an old caravan driver and trader in Yiwu, showed me used cow bells in 2007. He had driven caravans to Laos and Thailand before 1949. He died in January 2008 when he was eighty-eight. A member on the Sanzui tea website has a detailed report about his past stories (Baipuzi 2008).
There is a commonly cited saying that is used to prove the appreciation of Puer tea by the royal family of Qing in their daily diet: “Longjing [龙井, Dragon Well green tea] for summer, and Puer for winter” (Huang Guishu 2005: 86-88). It is well known that among the various types of Chinese tea, Puer tea is very helpful in the digestion of greasy food. This is said to have perfectly suited the needs of the Qing royal families who originated from among the northern nomads of China with meat as their staple food. After the rough production process in the Six Great Tea Mountains, the tea materials were sent to the capital, Puer, or to Simao where the General Tea Bureau (zong cha dian, 总茶店) was established, for fine production. This fine production took place under strict supervision. The final tea products were carried overland to Beijing.

Apart from its history of tribute tea for Beijing, what makes Yiwu unique today is the valuable aged Puer tea collected by connoisseurs in Hong Kong and Taiwan, such as Tongqing Hao and Songpin Hao. These tea products are said to be the oldest examples of Puer tea apart from the Golden Melon. All through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before modern transportation in inland China prospered, Puer tea originating in Yiwu and the nearby mountains was sent by caravan to Lai Châu (now in Vietnam) or Phongsali (now in Laos), and then further afield to Southeast Asian ports like Hải Phòng and Bangkok (Figure 1.9). It was finally transported by boat to Hong Kong. The overland trade and transport was dominated by Han traders from Yiwu and the nearby tea mountains, and the overseas part was often undertaken by Cantonese traders originating in Guangdong (Prasertkul 1989: 51, 73-74; Luo Qun 2004: 244; Zou Jiaju 2005: 57; Zhang Yingpei 2006: 83). Young Puer tea thus flowed to Hong Kong, was aged and accumulated there. Cantonese people say that even a child in Hong Kong would be encouraged by its parents to drink Puer tea while having yum cha (Chan 2008: iv).

---

8 For this history, some of the literature says Puer, while some says Simao. In general, it seems that the tribute tea factory was established in Ninger County under the capital Puer for fine production, and the General Tea Bureau of Simao was responsible for the whole tribute tea task. See: Huang Guishu (2005: 88-90), Lei Pingyang (2000: 28), Ni Tui (1981: 593-594).

9 The French built a meter-gauge railway between Kunming and Hải Phòng in 1910, which then could be used to transport tea, too.

10 As I have mentioned before, many Han inhabitants in the Six Great Tea Mountains were originally from Shiping. Shiping merchants were one of the most famous trade guilds in Yunnan all through the Ming, Qing Dynasty and the Republican period, and they also had their associations in Menghai and Simao (see Luo Qun 2004).
Besides Beijing and Hong Kong, there was a third place where Puer tea is sought after to balance greasy food: Tibet, which has long been regarded as the most important buyer of Yunnan’s tea. Tibetans are said to have started drinking tea in the eighth century of the Tang Dynasty, or in another saying in the third to fourth century of Wei and Jin Dynasties (the third to the fifth century), imported from Yunnan or Sichuan. More tea was traded from southern Yunnan to Tibet in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and flourished under the Qing (1636-1912). The Qing government began issuing tea certificates to Tibetan merchants at Yongsheng in 1661, and the site was changed to Lijiang in 1748. And after getting these certificates, the Tibetan traders could go to Puer for further tea trading (Zhou Hongjie 2004: 4; Fang Guoyu 2001: 429). This trade continued in the Republican period (1912-1949), but was often blocked by wars and political conflict. In Yiwu I heard an interesting story about the Tibetan trade from Zhang Yi as well as from some other elderly people. In 1945 a group of Tibetans arrived; their tall figures impressed the local Yiwunese very much. They bought all the tea they could find in Yiwu, even the tea stored in the henhouse according to one exaggerated account. The Tibetans had been hungry for Puer tea for many years during the Second World War when the caravan routes were blocked, and they travelled a long way to buy the tea even though some of their horses had died on the way to Yiwu.

The business of Puer tea in Yiwu was not always successful. It experienced several periods of decline mainly due to political factors. For instance, the Panthay Rebellion (1856-1873) blocked the northern routes toward Tibet for nearly 20 years (Zhang Yingpei 2007: 38). Later disputes over border issues between China and French Laos during the 1890s affected some trade to Southeast Asia (Walker 1999: 44-49; Murray 1980: 196-198). In 1938, the establishment of a national tea factory in Menghai, to the west of the Mekong, brought adverse impacts on the family tea business of the Six Great Tea Mountains (Zhang Yingpei 2007: 39-40). Next, during the Second World War and the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party in the 1940s, the tea trade virtually came to a halt. Later on several large fires and political troubles in Yibang (1940s) and Yiwu (1970s) destroyed many family houses, streets and historical relics. A few years after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (1949), the

---

11 More scholars put it as starting in the Tang Dynasty, see Hill (1989), Yang Bin (2004). Yang Haichao (2010) argues from a linguistic perspective that it was the Wei and Jin Dynasties.

12 Usually the Tibetan traders only covered the caravan transport from Tibet to Yongsheng (Lijiang), or sometimes as far as Puer, while the remaining routes were often dominated by the Han or Muslim Chinese (Hill 1989). The journeys of Tibetans directly to Yiwu, as mentioned in the following special case, were actually uncommon.
purchasing and selling of foodstuffs, including tea became a state monopoly, and the
operation of private family business was completely stopped. From the 1950s to the
1990s Yiwu and the nearby tea mountains mainly produced basic tea material for state-
owned tea factories (Zhang Yi 2006b: 34).

Though political struggle became the dominant theme in the Maoist era from the 1950s
to the late 1970s and many activities had to be sacrificed for class struggle, Yunnan’s
tea production didn’t stop. State-owned tea factories kept on producing tea as a required
task, on the one hand to supply the needs of Tibet, and on the other to supply Hong
Kong, Macao, and other countries in Southeast Asia and Europe. Maintaining supply to
Tibet was considered important for inter-ethnic relations, while supply to Hong Kong
and other countries was a way of gaining foreign currency (YTIEC 1993: 7-11, 160-
165).

When Hong Kong returned to mainland China from the British rule in 1997, many
Hong Kong residents, worrying about the political change, moved overseas and sold off
their Puer tea stocks that had been built up for many years. The biggest buyer was
Taiwan (Deng Shihai 2004: 84). In the history of Puer tea, it was not people from
Yunnan, Beijing, Tibet or even Hong Kong, that launched the re-discovery of the origin
of aged Puer tea, but a group of “tea madmen” from Taiwan (Zeng Zhixian 2001: 109).

In October 2007, in Yiwu, I met Mr. Lü, the head of that Taiwanese pioneering group.
He told me he brought aged Tongqing Puer tea with him when he and his group first
came to Yiwu in 1994. There was a strong wish driving his quest: to get more of this
kind of tea. However when he expressed this desire in Jinghong (the capital of
Xishuangbanna), the tour guide responded that she didn’t know about this place called
“Yiwu” and wondered why it was necessary to visit it. Lü and his group insisted
because they knew from historical accounts how important this place had been for Puer
tea. In fact, the concept about Puer tea at that time in Yunnan was different from what it
is nowadays. The artificially fermented kind was more commonly recognized as Puer
tea. That’s why Mr. Lü and his group were told by government officials in Kunming,
Simao and Jinghong not to go to Yiwu because Yiwu didn’t produce artificially
fermented Puer. But Mr. Lü and his group recognized the raw kind as authentic Puer tea
because the valuable aged ones, like Tongqing and Songpin Puer tea, were exactly
naturally fermented from the raw tea of the Six Great Tea Mountains.
But they were deeply frustrated when they finally reached Yiwu after a hard journey. They found neither aged Puer tea in storage nor new caked Puer tea in production. The way of producing basic tea material in loose form (rough production) remained, and people did this for dispatch to national tea factories, but the technique of making round-caked Puer tea (fine production) had been lost. Lü told me that what they saw was only a ruined and depressed Yiwu: bad transportation; few restaurants; a simple and crude guesthouse; old family houses; and village roads in bad repair. No one knew about aged Puer tea. Finding that the Puer tea industry had been inactive here for almost half a century, Mr. Lü and his group tried their best to dig out a few bright points: first, the tea resources were still there. Remarkably, the old and tall tea trees within the forest were still cultivated by both ethnic minorities and Han; second, there might be some older people who had worked on caked Puer tea still alive in Yiwu; third, aged Puer tea originating from Yiwu many years ago, which the Taiwanese brought with them, could be used as a model in reviving the industry. Although the basic tea material in loose form was recognized by Mr. Lü and his group as (raw) Puer tea, it was not convenient for transport and after all, all the valuable aged Puer tea had long been stored in the pressed caked form.

Zhao Chengjiiong, who worked in the government office of Yiwu Township and participated in the reception for the Taiwanese in 1994, recalled his astonishment:

We were really completely surprised at suddenly having a group of Taiwan guests and we could not understand why they took much trouble by traveling to our rough, rural and remote small village. Mr. Lü, the head of their group, invited us to share the aged tea he brought with him, and we later learnt that was Tongqing Hao. I thought its taste was great and it had a special smoothness, which I had never experienced for tea. He asked us to guess the price of this tea in the external market. I daringly estimated “four or five hundred RMB for one piece” and I thought to myself that this might have been too much. However, we could not believe our ears when Mr. Lü said that it was sold for 15000 RMB a piece in Taiwan!

Finally a decision was made by the Yiwu government that the wishes of the Taiwanese guests should be satisfied as much as possible. They recognized that the Taiwanese had made a very long journey in pursuit of Puer tea. They also recognized that the
relationship between mainland China and Taiwan was difficult but improving, and they were excited about the value of Yiwu’s Puer tea in the outside world.

Two old men in their sixties, who had been hired as workers for Tongqing Hao before 1949, were sought out and invited to be the new tea masters. Using the model of the aged tea cake brought by the Taiwanese, a process of teaching, learning and imitating began. Zhang Yi, who at that time was working on the local chronicles, participated in the tea processing classes and later developed a business relationship with the Taiwanese visitors. And thus developed the revitalized process of Puer tea making that was shown to the film crew eight years later, in 2002.

**Taste Preferences**

In his clean yard Zhang Yi put some loose tea material into an iron cylinder, steamed it for about ten seconds and then poured it into a cloth bag to shape with his hands into a round cake. Then the caked tea was pressed under a grindstone, with someone standing on it to add weight. After being put on a wooden shelf for a short while, the tea was taken out of the cloth bag for further drying. Finally seven pieces were wrapped together with bamboo leaves as a stack. This is known as “seven-son tea cake” (qi zì bìng, 七子饼) (Figure 1.10, also see Presentation 2 on DVD 2 ■).
This fully manual way of processing tea is practiced in Yiwu and the Six Great Tea Mountains, all located to the east of the Mekong in Xishuangbanna. By contrast, a mechanical method is commonly used in Menghai, another district in Xishuangbanna, to the west of the Mekong (Figure 0.2). There are other interesting contrasts between Yiwu and Menghai, with the Mekong as the boundary between them.

In the previous section, I drew a diachronic profile of Yiwu. In this section, I’ll draw its profile again, more synchronically, with Menghai as a comparison. This is to show that the authentic image of Yiwu and its Puer tea is constructed by reference to “the other,” not just by reference to the past. That is, the construction of identity is not just done by looking at Yiwu itself, but it is always accompanied with juxtaposition, competition and representation of the other (Baumann 1992; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993).

In terms of tea resources, both Yiwu and Menghai have tall tea trees in the forest and also the “bush” form of terraced tea fields, though their different soil and climate lead to different tea flavors. For rough production, they share similar procedures in tea harvesting, stir-frying, rolling and drying. More contrast lies in the fine production procedures, which have been shaped by the different ways the tea industry has developed in the past.

When the tea business in the Six Great Tea Mountains prospered during the Qing Dynasty from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century, Menghai was less famous for Puer tea, even though it also owned excellent tea resources. After the east bank of the Mekong was taken from the Dai ruler of Jinghong, by the Puer Prefecture of Qing, tea resources on the west bank remained under Dai control and were not easy for outside Han traders to get hold of. However the situation gradually changed in the early Republican period (from 1912) when the Dai township of Menghai became more open to outside traders and private tea companies were established there (Zhang Yingpei 2007: 36; Prasertkul 1989: 70; Hill 1989: 325-326). Its geographical advantage became prominent since it borders Burma and is located in the lowland plains which were more suitable for modern transportation. Thus in the early twentieth century there came into being the popular “southern tea routes” (*nan lu cha xian*, 南路茶线), in contrast to the northern routes towards Tibet via Simao and Puer that were often blocked, expensive, caravan-dependent and time-consuming (usually three to four months). Along the southern routes, tea went from Menghai to Rangoon (by caravan and train), and from
there it was shipped to Calcutta, and further via car or train plus caravan to Tibet. This took a total of thirty to forty days (YTIEC 1993: 8; Mu Jihong 2004: 78-79, 94-95).

A turning point—which finally broke through the dominant role of the Six Great Tea Mountains in Puer tea production and trade in Xishuangbanna—occurred in 1938. The first tea factory of Yunnan, the National Tea Factory of Menghai, was opened. It was a branch of the Central Tea Company of the Republic of China established by the national government for the purpose of improving red tea\(^{13}\) production and export. Advanced machines brought from British India and Burma began working on processing tea in the Menghai Tea Factory, marking the start of mechanical tea processing in Yunnan. But Yiwu maintained its handcrafted technique. This difference in processing techniques still persists today. Different terms are used to describe production units in the two places. For Menghai, the term is tea factory (*cha chang*, 茶厂); in Yiwu, it is household tea unit (*cha zhong*, 茶庄). The former stands for the rapid and large-scale modern production, while the latter persists in slow and small-scale traditional production (Figure 1.11 and 1.12).\(^{14}\) After 1938, the private tea business of Yiwu was knocked back by the policy support for the national factory in Menghai, and combined with the other events mentioned earlier, Yiwu gradually waned (Zhang Yingpei 2007: 39-40).

---

\(^{13}\) Black tea for English consumption.

\(^{14}\) This is the general situation. At present a few tea-processing units in Menghai also use handcrafted method; and in Yiwu, there also have been some so called tea factories, but they are smaller scale if compared with those in Menghai.

\(^{15}\) When the National Tea Factory of Menghai was initially established, mechanical processing was mostly applied on rough production such as tea sorting, rolling and stir-frying. And mechanical shaping

---

**Figure 1.11:** Machine pressing tea in Menghai.\(^{15}\)

**Figure 1.12:** Grindstone pressing tea in Yiwu.
Another turning point happened in 1973, when the artificial fermentation technique was formally invented in Kunming, in order to satisfy some consumers’ wishes of achieving the maturation of the tea within a shorter time. The technique was applied in Menghai soon after its invention and the product was the later-called artificially fermented Puer tea (shu cha, 熟茶), whose fermentation could be finished in two or three months. Today Menghai is known as the best place to produce artificially fermented Puer tea due to its special natural environment as well as its advanced techniques. Thus there comes the description “Menghai taste,” which refers to the unique taste of artificially fermented Puer tea only available from Menghai.

This artificial fermentation demands more techniques than just producing raw Puer tea. There had never been a national tea factory established in Yiwu to popularize artificial fermentation. In fact, many Yiwu people despised this processing technique and would even prefer not to drink its tea products. The iconic Puer tea of Yiwu had always been raw Puer tea (sheng cha, 生茶) waiting for natural fermentation. I asked many people in Yiwu why they didn’t produce artificially fermented Puer tea. There were several types of responses. First, “We don’t have that tradition,” or in a more direct way, “we don’t know how to do that.” This shows that artificial fermentation belongs in the large modern tea factory rather than in the small traditional home production unit. Second, “Using Yiwu tea material for artificial fermentation,” according to a young tea producer Wang Bin, “is just like firing a pile of money.” This displays the pride of Yiwu people in their excellent tea resources. In their mind, excellent quality tea material is good enough to drink after simple processing, and should only be fermented naturally. Third, “I’ve witnessed the process of artificial fermentation. It’s not clean at all. Is that kind of tea drinkable?” One female tea producer repeated this to me many times. Her concerns were echoed by other Yiwunese, and they regarded the fungi that grew on the tea in the process of artificial fermentation as unclean and harmful.

These preferences were rooted in Yiwu’s production tradition, and they had also been affected by the authenticity standard which had been recently initiated by Taiwanese connoisseurs and further developed by other traders and consumers. As several Taiwanese traders explained to me, the rare and very valuable Tongqing and Songpin brands, and other aged teas of the same generation, were all naturally developed from

and pressing tea in fine production wasn’t applied by national tea factories of Yunnan until the 1950s or 1970s (Deng Shihai 2004: 155, 159; Chan 2008: 57).
raw material originating in Yiwu and the nearby mountains. That is, the Taiwanese taste preference “strongly emphasized the concept of originality” (Yu Shuenn-der 2010: 133). They also contended that handcrafting would make the Puer tea cake sufficiently “loose” to be suitable for natural fermentation; whereas Menghai’s mechanical processing would only lead to a hard “discus” of tea that was too tightly packed to allow contact with the air. Such distinctions were elevated by some Puer tea writers, from both Taiwan and Yunnan, to a more abstract level. They argued that handcrafting and natural fermentation stands for superior culture and embodies the essence of Daoism (Lei Pingyang 2000; Deng Shihai 2004).

In terms of the binary contrast between “the raw and the cooked” proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1970; 2008; see also Leach 1970), the more artificial interference there is, the further the food is away from nature and the closer it is to culture. Handcrafting coincides with this point. But in terms of the naturalism of the raw Puer group, this is only the first step. On the second step, they consider that only tea aged by nature could produce the purest taste and superior spiritual enjoyment (Deng Shihai 2004; Lei Pingyang 2000). This pursuit is actually rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy like Daoism, which looks at human beings as part of the unity of the cosmos and seeks to follow the way of the nature. The art of Japanese food, which is derived partly from Daoism, also embodies this idea. Ashkenazi and Jacob (2000: 86) write that Japanese food should be made “as close as possible to the natural state of the foodstuff.” In this sense, the raw and natural essence of Puer tea does not mean that there is no human intervention at all but that “the human intervention must be as ‘natural,’ that is, as minimal as possible.” This challenges Lévi-Strauss’s binary opposition between nature and culture, and it shows that culture can be “cooked” not only by removing it from nature, but also by “preparing” it in a way that contains the essence of nature as much as possible. This approach displays the continuity of one important characteristic of Chinese culture in seeking authentic things: it seeks things that look natural, which, nevertheless, must be subtly and artificially processed. It echoes a saying about Chinese arts, such as the Chinese garden: it is man-made, but it looks like it was created by nature (sui you ren zuo, wan zi tian kai. 虽由人作，宛自天开).

In her discussion about crafting chocolates, Terrio (2005) argues that craft objects are often embedded with more symbolic meanings compared to mass-produced ones. Craft objects are also more closely linked to localized authenticity, and could be used to
construct a distinct “cultural authenticity” to counteract the globalization of production and consumption. Similarly, the raw preference in Yiwu is contextually selected and utilized by Puer tea actors to construct their ideal nature and culture. To them, artificially fermented Puer tea was technically produced by an unknown other, while raw Puer tea was to be “naturally” stored by oneself. Though such natural storage was also a product of human action, importantly it was “processed” by the collector himself. In this regard, the self-collected and self-stored Puer tea becomes even more authentic because its post-production involves one’s personal participation, and therefore is more closely tied to one’s own identity. The artificially fermented tea of Menghai lacks this personalized authenticity.

While the outside traders chose the unique crafted Puer tea of Yiwu, they were also choosing a unique type of social relationship. They wanted to negotiate with the small-scale family unit rather than the large-scale factory. Some traders described the relationship with the former as nuan (暖, warm), whereas the relationship with the latter was leng (冷, cold). In discussing the Chinese construction of social relations, Mayfair Yang (1989: 40) vividly uses the contrast between “uncooked and raw person” and “cooked and ripe person” to stress that only via identity transformation from the former to the latter, could an “outsider” be accepted as an “insider,” thus bridging the social gap. Yang concludes that in Chinese culture, the boundaries between self and others are often unclear, and personal identities are not necessarily bound to human nature but “constantly being created, altered, and dismantled in particular social relationships.” Echoing the context discussed by Yang, traders in Yiwu found that it was easier for them to be transformed from an uncooked to a cooked person when dealing with small-scale family units rather than big factories. Some of them even stayed with the family throughout the tea harvest season, seeking chances to talk and dine with the family members, and sometimes even cooperating with them on some aspects of tea production and trade. Through the cooperation, the traders made the final tea products more understandable, imbued with more human efforts and emotions, and hence more authentic.

\[\text{Cooking is often related to artificial work, but ripening is more regarded as a natural process. Mayfair Yang may have mixed them up. What she refers to in her discussion of gift economy should be more about cooking. Here I am also talking about cooking, and stress that this is an transforming process, in which outside traders seek to build up good relationship with local people within a short period of time.}\]
Besides the different production processes, many locals, traders and consumers drew a contrast in the tea taste between that from Yiwu and Menghai. Yiwu always focuses on raw Puer tea, but Menghai now produces both raw Puer tea and artificially fermented Puer tea. In Menghai, all that I heard about was the “Menghai taste,” which was initially used to describe its artificially fermented Puer tea but later was extended to its raw Puer tea as well. When applied to artificially fermented Puer tea, the Menghai taste refers to the mellow taste of the tea due to the advanced fermentation technique, and the special climate and water resources that are good for this fermenting process. When used for raw Puer tea, Menghai taste refers to a very strong tea taste (cha qi, 茶气; or ba qi, 霸气) and the very deep and long-lasting sweetness in the throat after the strong and bitter flavor (huigan, 回甘). This is attributed to the excellent and special tea resources in Menghai. Generally the tea price of Yiwu was higher than that of Menghai, but a particular sub-tea mountain in Menghai, called Laobanzhang (see Banzhang in Figure 0.2), has stood out in recent years and its tea price has exceeded that of Yiwu. The tea from Laobanzhang has become a super-star, and it was praised with the strongest tea feelings as the “king” among all raw Puer tea (ba qi, 霸气).

In contrast, Yiwu’s raw Puer tea was described in softer terms, though it was said that its softness also contains strong features. The soil of Yiwu is said to be more acidic; Menghai’s is more alkalic. And objectively this results in a difference in tea taste. According to some Yiwu tea lovers, both the raw Puer tea of Laobanzhang and Yiwu is strong; but the strong flavor of Laobanzhang comes too directly, while the strong flavor of Yiwu comes in a subtle way and gradually leads to a lingering after-taste. This was exemplified by Mr. Zheng, a sixty-year-old tea producer from Yiwu, in an introduction he composed for his own tea, as well as for all good Yiwu tea:

The tea has a strong stem, and a big and thick leaf, which contain rich substances. The tea leaves have white, black and yellow colors. After brewing it becomes bright red. It can be brewed for many more times than any other tea. It tastes less bitter and acerbic; it is soft and gentle, with a delicate fragrance and deep aroma. As soon as you swallow the tea brew, the faint bitterness and acerbity will disappear at once, only leaving you with a natural sweetness that lasts quite a long time. It was highly prized by the emperor of Qing: “the tea brew is pure; the taste is strong enough; the hui gan (回甘, sweetness after bitterness) is lingering; it touches one to the depth of one’s soul.” In sum, our
tea is of original flavor, original taste, and from an original environment (*yuan zhi, yuan wei, yuan shengtai* 原汁原味原生态). It is processed in a handcrafted way and is a healthy green drink. After natural fermentation it will become mellower: the longer storage, the better taste. I hope all of you will enjoy it.

However, in the opinion of people who were fond of the Menghai taste, all these soft advantages and culturally significant features became disadvantages. In their summary, Yiwu’s tea was tasteless, or, in the words of a trader, “it’s only a cultural speculation.”

Now it is time to balance these views. Jian, a trader from Jiangxi Province (in eastern China), who went to both Menghai and Yiwu, told me that he had been chewing over this distinction for a long time. “Here is a law I finally found out,” he said:

The Mekong is the boundary. On the west side, tea from Menghai is liked by Hong Kong and Guangdong traders. They prefer strong taste of tea, which is in accordance with their food habits; they don’t pay too much attention to “culture” but just want to acquire more varieties and quantities of tea, which is to the advantage of the tea factories in Menghai. The Six Great Tea Mountains, in the east of Mekong, belong to Taiwanese traders. They care very much about the “culture” attached to the tea, for example they practice more classical Chinese things and have respect for traditional things, and therefore are happier about Yiwu tea. They are the opposite to the Cantonese traders. The Taiwanese care more about the quality rather than the quantity, which the handcrafted way of making Yiwu tea is suitable for. Therefore, I’d say, Hong Kong and Guangdong traders *shou cha* (收茶, technically collected tea material); but Taiwan traders *zuo cha* (做茶, elaborately refined tea material).

Another trader, who only traded tea material from Yiwu, after knowing that Yiwu was my fieldwork focus, said to me, “I think you are making a right choice. No other tea areas in Yunnan could be the same as Yiwu owning excellent tea as well as having rich culture for you to dig out.”

In sum, Menghai, standing on the west Mekong, represents the modern mechanical way: large-scale factory production, accelerated fermentation, and the very strong “king” taste. Located to the east of the Mekong, Yiwu stands for the traditional handcrafted
way: small-scale family units, natural and slow processing, a soft, gentle but lingering after taste, and more things that could be “dug out” in terms of “culture.”

*A Cultural Tea Tour*

(Watch Film 3 on DVD 2 before or after reading this section) Before being visited by the Taiwanese in the mid 1990s, Yiwu and the Six Great Tea Mountains had been mentioned a lot in historical records. In this literature this place has a high profile for its tea trade, especially during the Qing and early Republican periods, but there is not much detail, more a black and white hue and only a few pictures. By using these previous works, for instance *Banna Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji Di Si Ji [Selected Works of Historical Accounts of Xishuangbanna, Volume 4]* (Zhao Chunzhou and Zhang Shungao 1988), the Taiwanese pioneers launched their journey as well as their new narrative about Yiwu. Zeng Zhixian was one of the Taiwanese pioneers who came to Yiwu in 1994. And his book, *Fangyuan Zhi Yuan: Shen Tan Jin Ya Cha Shijie [Experience within the Micro Circumference: A Deep Exploration in the World of Compressed Tea]*, became one of the earliest works in which Yiwu was depicted in detail with text plus rich pictures (Zeng Zhixian 2001). In Zeng’s narration, Yiwu became a space where the past and the present converged:

With the historical record as a reference and with the story telling about the old tea houses by local elites, in our mind there came the prosperous scenes of tea processing surrounded by people coming and going. Looking at those aged architectures in disrepair but still representing the classical ancient style, walking along the Ancient Routes of Tea and Horses, we had an illusion that the boundary of the timeline was broken, and we were going back to the past during the late Qing and early Republican period, sharing travel together with the famous masters of those well-known tea families (Zeng Zhixian 2001: 109).

A group of photos included in the book explained this nostalgia (Figure 1.13, 1.14, 1.15). These were images showing the old architecture, the flagstone path on which the ancient caravan had walked, the famous stone monument recording a local law case on tea, the horizontal brand inscribed with *Rui Gong Tian Chao* (瑞贡天朝, tribute to the

---

emperor). All of them were taken as important cultural relics as well as key representations of Yiwu. More importantly, according to Zeng, they were not completely dead relics, but had witnessed the vicissitudes of the old family tea brands and were still living in the livelihoods of their descendents.

Figure 1.13: Photo (a) in Zeng’s book. Family houses in Yiwu. The title on the left says “A journey looking for roots to the Ancient Six Great Tea Mountains.”

Figure 1.14: Photo (b) in Zeng’s book. From left to right: tea label, tribute tea brand, family houses.

Figure 1.15: Photo (c) in Zeng’s book. A stone monument recording a law case on tea.
Echoing Zeng, the subsequent literature, mass media illustrations, tour designs and commentaries, all reiterated this nostalgic theme, encouraging tourists to imagine the glorious past by using the present relics as reference points. Like many popular narratives in the world that had boosted the popularity of a certain cuisine (see Appadurai 1988; Ferguson 1998) or a certain place (see Ivy 1995; Notar 2006b), this literature played an important role in packaging Yiwu and its Puer tea. While guiding subjective imagination, the literature also tried to convey “objective” information about Yiwu. In the agreement of these writers, tourists, traders and locals, these writings were bearing a very important mission as they would be used as guidebooks and would greatly impact on travelers who came to experience authentic Yiwu as well as authentic Yiwu’s Puer tea.

Zhang Yingpei, a journalist from Kunming, had written some well-known works on Yiwu (Zhang Yingpei 2006). When I interviewed her in 2007, she told me that one of her motives for writing about Yiwu was her uneasiness about the fact that the previous works about Yiwu were mostly written by Taiwanese. She claimed that in those books she found some serious mistakes; for instance, they were wrong about the establishment date of Tongqing Hao, which would mislead consumers trying to identify an authentic piece of Puer tea. As a Yunnanese, she felt that she could do better than the outsiders. Her critical attitude demonstrates a strong identification as Yunnanese, in which conveying accurate information about the production site of Puer tea becomes an essential mission.

Locals also joined in this historical research and writing. Zhang Yi, the retired township head, was famous for this. He was well educated and he had worked on local history in the government, and he had cooperated with the first group of Taiwanese connoisseurs. He claimed to have a rich knowledge of Yiwu and its Puer tea and had become the most important source of first-hand information for many visitors and media workers. The other famous local writer, a middle school teacher, put his mission very directly: “only Yiwunese could tell clearly about Yiwu’s events.”

Local people had increasingly realized the value of Yiwu’s past. They welcomed researchers to the town, conveyed stories inherited from their ancestors, showed their own book collections on Yiwu and Puer tea, and even suggested visits to a certain place or interviews of a certain person. Many of them had got used to being disturbed by all
sorts of visitors, and they warmly welcomed these disturbances since they believed that historical discovery would help in boosting their tea business.

Puizi (web name), who was in charge of a column at a tea website, was delegated by a tea company to go to Yiwu to write a new book about the Six Great Tea Mountains. As his companion joked, Puizi was always happy when an old man appeared, because from him he would be able to dig out more ancient stories. He interviewed them with very detailed questions, which often made me feel that he was more like a professional anthropologist, and it seemed that the tea would be much more tasteful if this detailed history could be co-infused into the teacup.

Traders, whose original task was to trade good tea rather than history, also participated in this research. While collecting basic tea material, some traders endeavored to collect notes about Yiwu’s interesting stories. They didn’t intend to write a book, but they definitely planned to convey such knowledge to their future customers. As I later witnessed in their tea houses in Kunming, maps of the Six Great Tea Mountains were hung, and pictures of Yiwu’s tea trees, old architecture, and handcrafted ways of tea making, were all displayed. The masters of the tea houses who were able to annotate these images with stories were respected by their clients as perfect tea experts, and the Puer tea infused with this history was endowed with a unique cultural taste, and was worthwhile being more carefully chewed.

Through all these efforts, Yiwu was presented by multiple actors as a tea place full of culture (wenhua, 文化). The culture of Yiwu, according to those proponents, on the first level, lies in a series of concrete representations, as illustrated by the pictures in Zeng’s book: the old architecture, the remnants of the tea-horse road, and various relics. All these things are taken as living antiquities, silently but persistently showing the ever-prosperous period of Yiwu.

On the second level, these silent antiquities needed to be woken and vocalized. Past stories about tea families needed to be dug out, iterated and verified. In this sense, history, which involves wonderful stories and rich human characters, is equated with “culture.” When the historical moment and the present time converge in the realistic place, nostalgia, a necessary emotional experience for visitors, is aroused.
And on the third level, this kind of nostalgia for a place is put in a niche because it is so well linked to its representative commodity: Puer tea. Generally, nostalgia refers to recalling the past with memory. But “in a further globalizing twist,” nostalgia could be “without memory” and used “for the present” (Appadurai 1996: 48; see also Jameson 1983). Maurice Bloch (1998) shows how the past life of the older generation is shared and memorized by the younger generation who have never had those kind of experiences; Nicholas Tapp (2003) deals with how the overseas Hmong have a strong nostalgia for their presumed ancestral place in China, a place that they haven’t ever visited and how they intend to reuniite with “homeland” people that they have never been separated from. The advocacy of purchasing aged Puer tea obviously echoes such nostalgia. In popular writings, aged Puer tea is described as the best tea “bearing the weight of time” (Ran Dianrong 2005b), symbolizing the hard journey of the old caravans (Zeng Zhixian 2001), representing an old man who had experienced a lot (Mu Jihong 2004); stored and circulated via several hands, and hence bearing the stories and experiences of unknown others (Ran Dianrong 2005b). Just like the case of the younger generations mentioned by Block and the Hmong overseas talked about by Tapp, people purchasing aged Puer are encouraged to look back nostalgically to a world they have never lost. This is nostalgia for “imagined pasts never experienced” (Lowenthal 1985).

Furthermore, in terms of the preference for raw tea in Yiwu, a new version of nostalgia is created. In this preference, collecting, storing and consuming raw Puer tea is part of one’s own experience and memory; it starts from the present, and therefore the social life of this piece of Puer tea becomes addressable rather than depending upon the mythical and unaddressable others. This can be nostalgia using one’s own memory, and the collection and storage of raw tea is preparation for the nostalgia in the future when the raw Puer tea turns aged. Advocacy of raw Puer tea is thus advocacy for the imagined future that hasn’t come, yet has already been designed.

On the fourth level, the raw Puer tea processed by hand rather than by machine is considered to be full of more culture. That is, the object imbued with more direct human experience contains more cultural meanings and also a unique natural aura, as was discussed earlier.

On the fifth level, in China tea has long been considered as more than a simple drink to quench one’s thirst. It has long been discussed in poems, paintings and calligraphy, the
so-called “elegant activities.” Yiwu and its Puer tea, surrounded with more historical records and relics than other areas such as Menghai, coincide with this Chinese concern. This point was understood even by the local people who had not received much education. For example, Mr. He, a man more than sixty years old, often used this as a moral lesson for his son, “tea is better than alcohol. With alcohol, people often behave badly; with tea, everyone becomes wen zhi bing bing (文质彬彬, elegant and refined in manner).”

Based upon this cultural logic, visiting Yiwu becomes a pilgrimage for people who are eager to know about Puer tea. And there is a classical tour route for them during the pilgrimage. First of all, the travelers pay a visit to the aged tea trees in the forest (Figure 1.16). Although this places more emphasis on nature rather than culture, it is a necessary part of the tour because it shows them the “original environment” where the cultural “original taste” or “original flavor” comes from.

Next they walk around the old street of Yiwu, where the aged houses connected by the remnants of the tea-horse road can be seen (Figure 1.17). Since October 2006 a new museum built at the site of the original temple has been open for visitors. Various relics of Yiwu and the Six Great Tea Mountains have been gathered there for display.

Finally, the travelers usually go into the homes of some families, especially those with attractive architecture. Being recognized as possible traders or clients, or journalists or researchers who have come to discover more about Yiwu, the visitors are usually warmly welcomed by the owner of the house, allowed to have a careful look at the aged house, and even invited for a Shiping style meal with home-made soy sauce. Even if meals are not served, Puer tea always is. If they are lucky enough, the travelers may chance upon the family processing of caked Puer tea under the aged roof. The curiosity of travelers is often satisfied by allowing them to stand on the top of the grindstone that presses the tea and personally experience the way of “tradition.” Seeing the family working and being allowed to participate makes the production procedures visible; the original unfamiliarity or “alienation” of travelers to the tea products is largely removed (Terrio 2005: 149); the production process itself becomes consumable and “iconic of a kind of authenticity” (Dilley 2004: 805).
Figure 1.16: An old tea tree in Yiwu. It is over 10 meters high; the diameter of the trunk is around 40 centimeters. Some tea experts said that it's more than 500 years old.

Figure 1.17: A drawing by a visitor.
Conclusion: Imagined Originality

Generated by the efforts of both locals and non-locals, standards on the authenticity of Yiwu and its Puer tea are constructed. On the one hand, this echoes Walter Benjamin (1969) when he writes that in the age of mechanical reproduction, the concept of authenticity is closely tied to “originality,” as things regarded as authentic must contain an original “aura.” As I have shown, the standards for authentic Yiwu and authentic Yiwu Puer tea care about the original “aura” very much. The very traditional handcrafting of tea has inspired various forms of nostalgia and various “missions” to discover historical “truth.” On the other hand, the case of Puer tea diverges from Benjamin’s point, or perhaps its complexity goes beyond Benjamin who saw the originality and authenticity of things as residing in their singularity, uniqueness and inability to be replaced. According to Benjamin, when copies proliferated as a result of mechanical reproduction—like print, photography and film—in the nineteenth century, people begun to worry about the issue of originality. In Yiwu Puer tea’s case, the original, namely the aged Puer tea and the traditional way of handcrafting, is respected very much, and in the meanwhile the copies, namely the raw Puer tea, are greatly encouraged for reproduction and assured to be done in the original handcrafting rather than mechanical way.

Actually it has been very difficult to decide whether the raw or the aged kind is more original and authentic. When the raw Puer tea was made in Yiwu fifty years ago, it was not destined to be consumed only when it was aged, and the aged value of Puer tea wasn’t widely advocated until the connoisseurs, especially those from Taiwan, recently began their journeys to the production regions. Perhaps one could say that the raw Puer tea is more original because it is actually the pre-existent mode of the aged. However, the fact is that the aged Puer tea exported from Yiwu over fifty years ago and recently brought back by connoisseurs is becoming the very standardized original model. So one could also say that the valuable aged kind is more original and represents the connoisseurs’ real request for authenticity. Nevertheless the fact is that the availability of the aged kind is rather limited and decreasing in amount. So, in order to get more “authentic” and valuable products, the connoisseurs, together with other actors, deliberately but inconspicuously replaced the authenticity object, temporarily forgetting about the aged flavor but re-creating a series of new standards based on the authentic
raw taste in the production regions. In specific comparison with industrially produced Menghai tea, the raw preference is regarded as standing for a higher level of culture.

So, rather than selecting either kind as uniquely authentic, these connoisseurs’ standards suggest that both the raw and the aged are authentic, as long as the raw is processed in the same way as they think that the aged might have been. Time will bridge the gap and the raw will one day become as valuable as the aged. That is, originality is now taken as not being completely singular and unique. Rather it can be flexibly transformed back and forth between two poles.

A hidden problem is that changes have occurred in various aspects, including the production skill, the storage condition and even the tea resources, compared with more than fifty years ago when the current aged Puer tea was born. So actually large doubts emerge about whether the authentic aged kind is a product of exactly the same process as the current authentic raw kind. So, originality may never be proved to be authentic, and the recently re-bloomed authenticity of raw Puer tea largely relies on deduction and imagination and the expectation of a test in the future.

According to Arjun Appadarai (Appadurai 1996: 49), in the new global order, imagination is becoming “central to all forms of agency.” Picking up on the same theme, Marilyn Ivy (1995) traces how the rural Tōno, a place narrated about in well-known folklore studies, is imagined as a nostalgic hometown representation of authentic Japanese tradition and was constructed as a museum-like tour site in the 1970s Discover Japan Campaign. Beth E. Notar (Notar 2006b), in her research about the after-effects of three popular narratives on Dali in Yunnan (a guide book, a movie musical, and a martial arts novel), further develops the relationship between imagination and authenticity. She argues that the authenticity of Dali has become less important to visitors, rather they look for a place “to indulge in and perform their own fantastic nostalgia based on previously consumed narratives” (Notar 2006b: 109). So, it is the popular narratives that become the authenticity standards for visitors in imagining what Dali should be.

Indeed, as Notar shows, the “material after-effects” of such literary narratives are immense. In Yiwu, the literary narratives are far more diverse, and the more crucial material after-effects actually originate in the market narratives about aged Puer tea’s high value. This leads to distinct concepts about authenticity and added ways of
imagination. Specifically, this particular type of authenticity defines originality flexibly, and the imagination of Yiwu and its Puer tea refers not only to the past, but also relies on the present and the future. I argue that it is such flexibly mixed-up imagined standards, co-developed by non-locals and locals that shape Yiwu’s authentic status on Puer tea. The re-blooming of Yiwu’s Puer tea industry is situated in a context of high imagination about originality. And the imagined originality brings a jianghu aura to tea production and trade in the tea mountains, which is filled up with multiply self-defined regulations, various mysteries in differentiating the authenticity of Puer tea, and also increasing suspicion and competition in people’s trade relationships.
Chapter 2 Tensions under the Bloom

Since he is in jianghu, he could do nothing but follow the law of jianghu.
(A Chinese Proverb: 人在江湖，身不由己)

Bloom with Modern Regulation

I arrived in Yiwu in early March 2007, to start my fieldwork. It was dusk. After four hours on the bus from Jinhong along winding mountain routes (about 110 kilometers), I was tired and hungry. Accommodation was the first issue. I went to a nearby guesthouse. Unfortunately it was full that day. “All our rooms need to be booked ahead if you really want to stay here. Haven’t you seen those cars in the courtyard? All of them belong to the bosses who came for tea,” I was told by the owner. It took me some time to finally settle down at another guesthouse. Even with tough bargaining, the monthly rent was twice as expensive as a good apartment in Kunming. There were eleven guesthouses in Yiwu with about 170 beds, according to the statistics held by the local police station. This was a big contrast to 1994, when the Taiwanese first arrived and found only one guesthouse run by the township government. When I first came in 2002 there were less than five.

While having dinner at the restaurant along the main street, I noticed that there were several houses nearby under construction. Although it was after seven in the evening, trucks and cars were still passing by, kicking up dust and building rubbish. Waiting in the busy restaurant while I watched the busy road outside, I wondered whether one thing had really had a significant impact in Yiwu: the Quality Safety (QS) Standard for the fine production of Puer tea.

The next day I went to visit Mr. Zheng, an old man who I met one year earlier when he kindly gave me some Puer tea that he had made. I remembered very well that he had a pleasant large house with several separate rooms, an open yard where people could sit down at a small square table to eat and drink tea, a lovely front door framed with orange flowers on a vine and a long stairway connecting the door with the outside street. However I could not find his house easily this time. It seemed to have disappeared. While wandering, I luckily ran into Mr. Zheng in the street. After recognizing me, he invited me to his house. The house still stood in the original place, but something had changed, not recognized by me just now. The stairs, the front door and the orange flowers had all disappeared, replaced by a paved slope. Five meters away under a tree a
pick-up truck was parked. The change from the front door and stairs to the paved slope was, I was told, for the convenience of tea transport. Moreover, I found that Mr. Zheng’s family house was largely transformed. Two thirds of the internal spaces, which used to be several bedrooms and one living room, were segmented into smaller units for tea processing on a production line. In sequence they were “tea material storing room,” “tea material sorting room,” “tea pressing room,” “tea drying room,” “the dressing and cleaning room.” The size of each room ranged from about four to ten square meters. Only one third of the original house was left for living spaces. Bedrooms were in short supply and could not provide extra spaces even for immediate family members who came home to visit (see Film 4 on DVD 1 □).

I felt sorry for the narrowing of the Zheng family’s living spaces. But Mr. Zheng said that was all right and that it was worthwhile, since only in this way could he reach the standard of QS without needing to build another independent tea processing house elsewhere. Another building would be very difficult for him as it would cost more than ten times as much as he had invested in renovating his house.

Puer tea production in Yiwu is divided into two stages: rough production and fine production (see Presentation 1 and 2 on DVD 2 □). Rough production includes tea harvesting, stir-frying, rolling and drying. The final product at this stage is called maocha (毛茶, the basic tea material or loose raw tea material). In fine production, maocha is steamed, hand shaped in a cloth bag, pressed with a grindstone, dried, and finally packed. Before the QS came into force, these procedures, except tea harvesting, were all done at local family houses; production areas were not routinely separated; people’s living, cooking, eating, and domestic chickens were all together under the same roof as the tea processing.

Since the early 2000s, the National Administration of Quality Supervision had launched a series of standards to bring more foodstuffs, including tea, into line with a stricter set of market standards. Accordingly, the Yunnan Provincial Supervision Bureau of Technology and Quality began to draft the Quality Safety (QS) Standard on tea in 2005.1 While according to gossip, this was just a new way of collecting more tax from the rising Puer tea industry, the formal QS documents declared that all the requirements were significant in assuring that Puer tea is processed in a clean and safe environment

1 The Xishuangbanna Supervision Bureau of Technology and Quality initiated the draft in 2005, which the later provincial standard was mostly based upon.
(Zhang Shungao and Su Fanghua 2007: 207). What QS actually aims to standardize is fine production. It has strict requirements for production sites, scale and facilities. For example, the production site should be at least fifty meters away from refuse dumps, farm animals and hospitals; at least one hundred meters away from fields where pesticides are applied, and even further from industrial areas; the production area should be a certain minimum size; there should be separate rooms for raw materials, auxiliary materials, semi-finished products and finished products, with no other goods stored with them; and there should be specific machines for different aspects of tea processing (Zhang Shungao and Su Fanghua 2007: 222).

Most of these standards challenged the “traditional” way of fine production in Yiwu in terms of scale. Fine production had been done in family houses since the establishment of the old commercial brands in the Qing and Republican period. After being paused for almost half a century, these fine processing techniques had been revived following the Taiwanese visit. The local producers thought they were doing exactly the same as their ancestors, and no one had ever thought that making caked tea in small family units was improper. The new standards, however, would transform the small family spaces into large-scale units, more like tea factories, leaving little living space in family homes. Most importantly, the QS standards needed a high level of investment. Although the blooming Puer tea industry had helped locals to improve their living standards, it was still a major challenge for most families to spend money on enlarging their tea production facilities.

The standard was formally announced in Yiwu in February 2006, with the message that if producers could not reach the standard, they would not be allowed to produce Puer tea anymore and their products would be banned from the market. The deadline was the beginning of 2007. This information caused considerable panic. Many people were afraid that they would not be able to produce Puer tea any more.

Under the double pressure of the modern QS request and the oppositional calls to protect “tradition,” a middle compromise solution emerged. It was launched by some elites and officials of Yiwu and Yunnan, and endorsed by the relevant governmental departments in Xishuangbanna. “The Yiwu Zhengshan (Authentic Tea Mountain) Limited Company” was founded in June 2006, as a result of this compromise between modernity and revived tradition. Twenty-four family units (around one third or one half
of the total tea processing units in Yiwu\textsuperscript{2} plus one general company in Kunming participated as the stockholders. Each member unit needed to try their best to transform and improve the tea processing environment based on their original family scale, but they did not need to build a new production area. All the transformation and improvement was carried on under the guidance of the company and the QS supervision bureau. After all the family units finished their transformation and passed the government checks, the company was granted a single certification of QS approval. That is, twenty-five tea-processing units shared the same QS certification. Mr. Zheng joined in this organized unit, and therefore he didn’t build a new tea factory but just renovated his family house.

I visited more local tea production units that were members of this company. Like Mr. Zheng, they had all tried their best to transform their living spaces in order to continue the Puer tea business. But I still could not help being shocked when I entered the door of Mr. Li’s old house. The central town of Yiwu is divided into two parts, with the main street as the boundary between them. On the east side there is the comparatively new area near the vegetable market. On the west side there is the so-called old street, where older houses stand (Figure 2.1). Mr. Zheng’s house was located in the new area and was built during the 1950s in a more modern style. The transformation of his house could be “all right,” in Mr. Zheng’s words, since it was not old enough to be “preserved heritage.” But where Mr. Li lived was one of the famous examples of Han architecture in the old street, built in the early 1900s. It was once owned by a political leader during the 1930s and 1940s, and was later used as the office of the local authorities in the late 1940s. Mr. Li, who was seventy-years-old and once worked in the Yiwu government office, told me about the history of his house when I had briefly visited Yiwu in early 2006. At that time, the two-level house looked old but was still well kept, with a clean courtyard surrounded by ventilated corridors. But by March 2007, part of the corridors were blocked, separated and marked as various tea processing rooms; the new white cement applied to the renovated sections was in obvious contrast to the aged red of the original house (Figure 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4). From other locals, I got to know that this house was actually not allowed to be transformed, since it was almost like an antique and was on the list of Yiwu’s preserved architecture. But the local government was not able to advise Mr. Li on how to maintain the original features of the house while, at the same

\textsuperscript{2} The data from local government indicated that there were 50 tea processing units in Yiwu in 2007. But I was told by many locals that there could actually be around 80.
time, reaching the QS standard. Finally Mr. Li joined with the Yiwu Zhengshan Company and transformed part of his house for tea processing. Since Mr. Li had previously worked in the Yiwu government and was well-respected, no one formally objected to his transformation of the house.

Figure 2.1: A sketch map of central Yiwu.
Figure 2.2: Mr. Li’s house is one of the “preserved heritage” houses in the old street of Yiwu (photo taken in 2007).

Figure 2.3: The courtyard of Mr. Li’s house in 2006.
Figure 2.4: The courtyard of Mr. Li’s house in 2007. The white section was built for tea processing.

However, Mr. He, who shared the other half of the original ancient house, took an entirely different attitude. He did not join the company. The house transformation recommended by the Zhengshan Company, in Mr. He’s opinion, could neither protect the traditional architecture well, nor reach the QS standard in a strict sense. He told me a story. Several months ago some provincial officials came to inspect how the implementation of QS was going in Yiwu. After visiting those processing units that had passed QS and looked more like factories, they finally came to Mr. He’s house to see how Puer tea was processed in the old way within a well-preserved aged house. This visit seemed to be part of an essential procedure, not for serious inspection, but more for witnessing what they saw as the real tradition of Yiwu. This had made Mr. He very proud, but his application to local authorities for assistance in acquiring QS without destroying the aged architecture still did not succeed. He was angry but preferred not to take the same course of action as his neighbor. But he soberly realized that he must continue his tea business, since his daughter was opening a tea shop in Kunming and he had built up stable relationships with many outside clients. These factors pushed him to pass the QS. He seemed worried as well as confident. The confidence, I gradually learnt, came from his collaboration with a large tea company in Kunming, which promised to sponsor him to build a completely new tea factory elsewhere in Yiwu.
According to the statistics of the Yiwu government, in March 2007 there were 50 units undertaking fine production of Puer tea in Yiwu and 36 of these had passed the QS in various ways. After heating up all through 2006, the QS issue had almost been concluded when I reached Yiwu in March 2007, though many of its impacts continued.

So, the re-discovered tradition of tea processing in Yiwu was challenged by a modern regulation. Responding practically, many local tea producers had to adopt various strategies to cope with it. What was in changing was not only the way of producing tea and the way that the locals lived, but also the way that the whole image of the place was presented to the outside. Part of the “original” aura of the authenticity of Yiwu and its Puer tea had been challenged.

*Bloom at High Price*

Spring tea is regarded as the best since the plant accumulates more nutrients after a rest during winter. In the spring of 2007, around March, various groups of people converged on Yiwu. There were traders, travelers, journalists, photographers, and artists, from all over the world; from Jinghong, Kunming, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Henan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. This scene seemingly echoed the imagined historical glory of Yiwu when “hundreds of thousands of people came to trade in the tea mountains” (Tan Cui 1981: 387). The guesthouse where I stayed was bustling everyday. Someone came while someone left. Very few actively said hello to each other. But from the way that they sized each other up, it was clear that everyone was trying to discover the other’s identity. At the local family houses I also saw various visitors coming and going. The same aura of suspicion was evident between the visitors themselves, and between the visitors and the local families. Sitting in Mr. Zheng’s house, I was suspected by a trader from Kunming as being someone who was invited by the Zheng family to be a collaborator in their sales promotion. This atmosphere made me feel that I was located in a roadside restaurant, similar to that in martial arts fiction, where various strangers of unknown origin meet, each suspecting that a fight would soon break out.

The Puer tea business is like the world of *jianghu*, and this chapter examines the Puer *jianghu* in the tea production area. This *jianghu* confusion was situated in the context of

---

3 The trader told me this when we became friends later.
relatively weak official regulation of Puer tea’s production and trade, despite the fact that a new QS regulation had been established. This weakness opened the door for the jianghu actors to pursue their own ways of defining the authenticity of tea. At the same time the number of visitors to Yiwu suddenly increased rapidly, and the tea price unexpectedly rose. The suspicion between people arose in a context of heightened competition, and trading authentic Puer tea in Yiwu became a major challenge.

Most travelers usually stayed in Yiwu for only a few days. But traders must stay longer. They need to select the basic tea material, find a trustworthy local family for fine processing, negotiate about the price, and finally to sort out the packaging and transport. Since QS was implemented in Yiwu, there was an added task for traders: the local family they selected must have achieved QS, or it would mean that their final tea product would be hard to sell in the urban market. Though in fact some traders still collaborated with locals without QS, and finally sorted out their own ways of selling.

Wen, a trader from Kunming, had run his Puer tea business for five years. Every year he came to Yiwu before the real business began. He spent some time enquiring about the most recent information; then he bought maocha (the basic tea material) from selected mountains at carefully chosen times; and he supervised the whole procedure of fine production from tea pressing to packaging. After the final products were dispatched, he left Yiwu, usually at the very end of the harvest season.

In the spring of 2007, what initially obstructed Wen, and the other traders, was the abnormal climate: it was rather dry in Xishuangbanna that spring. There had been no rain between the Chinese New Year (early February) and mid-April 2007. As a result, the tea sprouted rather slowly, and therefore maocha was sold for a higher price by tea growers that included both Han and other ethnic minorities like Yi and Yao. The highest price of the previous autumn was around 130 RMB. It would be taken as normal if the price in the next main harvest season was an additional 30 or 50 RMB. However, in mid March 2007 the starting price of maocha was more than 300 RMB. One of the famous sub-villages of Yiwu called Mahei, which was mainly inhabited by Han plus some Yi, was selling maocha for 360 RMB.

Wen decided to refrain from immediate buying, hoping the tea price would decline later. This abnormally high tea price was attributed by him and others to two factors: the dry weather which had resulted in limited supply that could not match the high demand; and
the “interference” by a few tourists, who, only staying in Yiwu for a short time, had impatiently bought maocha before the real traders started their work.

One day in mid-March, Zheng Da, the oldest son of Mr. Zheng, came back from Jinghong with some news about the tea price in Laobanzhang, one of the tea mountains near Menghai to the west of the Mekong: its maocha had sold for 800 RMB per kilogram two weeks earlier. There was a rumor that this high price had been set by the local government and it suddenly jumped to 1200 RMB one day before Zheng Da came back to Yiwu! There was another widely told story that was funny as well as annoying: in the past guests would always be served tea in Laobanzhang, but this had now been replaced with a bottle of water, since tea had become so valuable.

At this stage, people in Yiwu realized that the increasing price was not confined to Yiwu, but was common in all the tea areas of Xishuangbanna and Yunnan. In fact, it seemed that Yiwu’s price was not so high at all but could rise further to catch up with the others. It was also said that the surprisingly high price of Laobanzhang maocha was caused by the fierce competition among Guangdong traders, who liked the very strong taste of Puer tea very much. The influence from other tea areas, therefore, was taken as a third factor contributing to the increase in price.

The increasing price of maocha brought worries as well as happiness, depending upon people’s different situations. In Yiwu, almost every family is now involved in the tea business, whether it is rough or fine production. For those who were only involved in rough production, the increasing tea price made them very happy, since they only needed to harvest their own tea trees, process the leaves into maocha and then sell it at a high price without worrying about later procedures. And it boosted their enthusiasm for working in the tea fields. People joked that a tea picker just coming back from the fields was “carrying a basket of money in the street.” Or they said that “someone was rolling money very hard,” referring to one of the rough production procedures when tea leaves are twisted by hand.

For people who were involved in fine production, the increasing price brought them more worries, since they needed to have enough capital to collect maocha and they had to worry about how the final products could be sold. Mr. Zheng was one of those who was worried. The tea that he had produced during the last two years had sold well but he still had some stock. And he had spent money on meeting the QS requirements. The
transformation of his house cost him about 50,000 RMB. Meanwhile another 20,000 RMB was paid to the Zhengshan Company, of which he was a member. Now he had to spend more money collecting unreasonably expensive maocha. He was waiting for the price to decline, but he was worried that the tea material would be grabbed by others quickly and would not be available for him later.

Unlike Mr. Zheng, another local producer, Mr. Gao, was involved in both rough and fine production. He owned some tea fields, but still needed to collect more maocha from other sources in order to cater for his larger-scale new factory, established in partnership with his friend. The new factory cost them 600,000 RMB. After having passed the QS standard successfully, it opened in late March 2007 and was proclaimed to be the best one in Yiwu. But now they were in debt since they had borrowed money from several sources to build the new factory. Now that price of maocha had increased unexpectedly, it meant that they would face even more debt.

Many of these local tea producers adopted a “neutral” strategy: they began collecting some lower-grade and cheaper maocha while also buying some good quality and expensive maocha in order to achieve a good balance in the general quality of the final product. Their primary desire was to find stable clients to whom they could sell their tea. They were all happy that Puer tea was becoming much more popular, but they realized at the same time that the competition in the business was becoming very hot. They could see that there were many outside traders who came to Yiwu collecting maocha, with whom they competed as well as collaborated.

Most outside traders were only involved in fine production by contracting with tea producers in Yiwu. The unexpected price rise brought worries to most of them. For many individual tea traders, or even some bigger tea companies, the turnover of money was difficult before the final tea products were actually sold. Only a few traders were happy about the situation, such as one from Beijing:

Of course I feel the price is increasing abnormally, but I am happy. Because it means that a large number of incapable traders will be defeated and finally thrown out from the Puer tea market if they are not able to cope with the challenging price. And I am confident about myself. This is just like the shuffling of the cards, and only the fittest will survive.
Something I heard at the end of April echoed this statement, when Mr. Gao conveyed some important news: “I heard that three big companies from Kunming have come to Yiwu this spring. After deliberately raising the tea price by driving out others, they left.” So besides bad weather, short-stay tourists, and price competition between tea areas, the deliberate interference by outside companies became the fourth excuse for the high price. However, this point was never verified, although it persisted as gossip. It made the increase of the tea price in Yiwu more mysterious and it seemed there was an invisible hand coming in to “shuffle the cards.”

What was obvious was that the price of everything in Yiwu was increasing. When I went to the Yiwu’s only photo-copy shop, I was charged five times as much as in Kunming for printing and copying. When I asked why, they said, “you know, since the tea price has been elevated, we have to follow.” There was no exception for meat, vegetables or guesthouses. It was hard to judge whether the tea price followed them or these things followed tea.4

Another visible thing was that the number of Puer tea investors was becoming larger and larger. One afternoon in early April, the trader Wen came to Mr. Zheng’s house for tea sharing. I participated, too. Just before the tea tasting, one man came in and said hello. He was new to us. He introduced himself as Xu, a tea trader from Guangzhou (see Film 5 on DVD 2). He said that he had first arrived in Yiwu that morning. Obviously, he was trying to find a local family to cooperate with in the future. Mr. Zheng warmly invited him to join in the tea tasting. Unlike many traders who were not happy to tell people about their background and purpose at the beginning, Xu came straight to the point that he traded tea in many areas of Yunnan so that he could cater for the various requests of his clients. In his description, the journey to Yunnan was arduous, almost as difficult as the caravan journeys of the past. Taking a train from Guangzhou to Kunming, instead of an airplane, to save money, he arrived in Yunnan in early March. He had been to Baoshan, Lincang and Simao; along the Mekong he had been to Menghai and finally came to Yiwu (Figure 0.1 and 0.2). However, during these journeys, shocked by the continually rising price, he had not really collected any maocha. He felt sad because he had achieved nothing in the past months since he left

4 It was well known that in 2007 the price of pork and many foodstuffs in China rose sharply. This wider economic phenomenon may also have contributed to Puer tea’s elevated price.
home. Tortured by the high price and unable to understand its change, he had almost decided to turn back and give up on several occasions, but when thinking about his long-term business he persisted in this hard journey. He sincerely hoped he would make some tea business in Yiwu by cooperating with a local tea family. But since Yiwu was totally new to him, he was eager to learn some local information.

Being moved by Xu’s hard journey, Mr. Zheng and Wen conveyed him some information about Yiwu, and Mr. Zheng showed him his family-made tea products. When looking at the Puer tea cake, Xu could not help giving a deep sigh. He said that he was forced into the Puer tea business by requests from his clients, since Puer tea was in heavy demand in Guangdong. He had a wholesale tea shop in Fangcun Tea Market in Guangzhou, the largest wholesale tea market in China. But he said he was only xiao yu (小鱼, a small fish) swimming among thousands of tea traders in that market, where everyone was now involved in the Puer tea business. But his favorite tea, he admitted, was actually Tieguanyin (铁观音, Iron Godness of Mercy), a famous oolong tea, which used to be his dominant product prior to Puer tea’s prevalence. Out of politeness he continued drinking the Puer tea served by Mr. Zheng but he seldom commented on its taste and showed little interest. Comparing Tieguanyin with Puer tea, he said the former had developed a steadily increasing price and it was a mature tea product in the market; not like Puer tea where everything seemed to be chaotic and its prospect was very questionable.

Later, Xu did build a business connection with Mr. Zheng. He collected maocha by himself or deputized Mr. Zheng to collect maocha for him. The fine production was done at Mr. Zheng’s house, for which Xu paid 10 RMB per kilogram. And Xu continued to be always on the run between Yiwu, Menghai and several other tea areas. He always complained about the hard journey and tough prices but he persisted. Xu’s case was typical and showed an important fact: even those who did not have a real interest in Puer tea and were only “small fish” had been forced to join in the sea of the Puer tea business.

On later occasions I met more people whose past work had nothing to do with tea but who were also growing in their enthusiasm for Puer tea trade or collection. With limited tea resources but increasing buyers from more and more origins, it was no wonder that the maocha price was rising higher and higher.
Puer tea and its increasing price dominated events in Yiwu during the spring of 2007. People talked about Puer tea when they met, when they dined, when they worked on other things, when they went to a wedding ceremony. Many local youths preferred to stay at home and help their parents with the Puer tea business rather than going to cities, where they might earn less than they did in Yiwu. At the same time, Yiwu was also attracting workers from other rural areas—with diverse ethnic origins like Yi, Miao and Han—to come to work on Puer tea (Figure 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7).

Figure 2.5: Maocha being sun-dried in the main street of Yiwu.
Figure 2.6: With money gained from tea, more constructions are going on. The street in the back is the old street.

Figure 2.7: A Miao woman (left) from Honghe (southeast Yunnan) who came to work for a tea family in Yiwu.
“A Battle of Wits and Bravery”

The spring rain eventually came to Yiwu in mid-April, but the price continued going up. At the end of April it had reached 400 RMB when the tea leaves sprouting peaked. At this moment Wen decided that he had to begin collecting maocha, or the spring season would be over. The task of identifying “authentic” maocha, which had challenged him a lot before, would challenge him even more this year under the special conditions of intense competition.

Among the various traders, Wen was above average. He never declared that he was very capable. He said he ran his individual business on a small scale, but emphasized that he had the choicest goods. And he was confident that he would not be shuffled out of the Puer tea market since he had very stable customers especially those from Taiwan who demanded high tea quality. These clients had pre-ordered quantities of Puer tea from him with payment prior to the tea being processed. They trusted Wen very much, and in relation to the tea price, they accepted that it would fluctuate in line with market conditions. But, for Wen, trust also meant pressure. As his clients were very critical tea drinkers, he had to select the authentic tea material of Yiwu if he wanted to maintain a stable relationship with them.

Although the QS standard was established by the provincial government to ensure the clean production of Puer tea, it only focused on fine production while leaving rough production as a non-regulated domain. The latter, however, is considered by critical traders, like Wen, to be essential in determining the quality of maocha and hence also that of the later Puer tea products. For example, how much the tea plant was pruned, at what temperature the tea leaves were stir-fried, how they were rolled; all these things have an important effect on the final tea taste. In many aspects, these considerations are similar to the specialty coffee standards which arose in America in the 1970s that asked for hand-crafted, single-origin coffee with distinctive flavors (Talbot 2004). After being heavily influenced by Taiwanese connoisseur standards, Wen and other traders further developed their own practical guidelines and conveyed them to the tea farmers. These guidelines went beyond, as well as supplemented, the state’s regulation. Different traders guided the growers in different ways. As a result, the methods of rough processing tea in Yiwu were diverse. Since the tea plants belonged to the local tea

5 The Xishuangbanna Supervision Bureau of Technology and Quality has set some guidelines for rough production. But the guidelines are advisory not compulsory.
farmers—many of whom were Yao, Yi or Han—Wen and the other traders could not always be with them supervising, but just gave them guidance when they went there. And so the final judgement on the authenticity of maocha could be made only via careful judgement before buying.

Wen was perhaps the most selective trader among those I met in Yiwu and he had good skills in tea differentiation. First, he must select authentic maocha from forest tea, and process it separately from maocha from terrace tea. Yiwu has old tea trees, some of which are hundreds of years old, scattered among the forest. The oldest one, which may have been initially cultivated by the indigenous ethnic group "ben ren," is estimated to be about 800 years old. Since the early 1980s, large areas of terrace tea gardens have been planted. They were spaced much more narrowly than the forest trees and they looked more like bush plants due to regular trimming, but they still retained the same botanic characteristic as forest tea (Figure 2.8 and 2.9). Maocha made of terrace tea and maocha made of forest tea used to have the same price. However, since around 2004, forest tea has been traded for a much higher price than terrace tea due to the claim of outside traders that the older the tea plant is, the better its taste would be. Forest tea was thought to have had minimal contact with pesticide or fertilizer due to its growing in a good ecosystem under the forest canopy and being mixed with many other plants. Moreover, it was well-known that aged and valuable Puer tea, like Tongqing and Songpin, was made from forest tea material before terrace tea fields were established. Therefore, the price gap between forest tea and terrace tea became bigger and bigger. In 2006, forest tea (maocha) was more than 100 RMB per kilogram, and terrace tea was around 30 or 40 RMB. When the former reached around 400 RMB in the spring of 2007, the latter was around 100 RMB (watch Film 2 on DVD 1).

---

6 A few locals said this began from the late 1970s.
7 Some local people said it was since 2002.
Figure 2.8: Forest tea. The post is to help with climbing to pick the tea leaves.

Figure 2.9: Terrace tea.
Figure 2.10: Tea leaves with fine “fur” are often considered to be forest tea, but it is not always this case.

It was a common struggle for every maocha buyer to differentiate forest tea material from terrace tea material. It became more challenging when the price gap became so large in 2007, and it became more common for terrace tea material to be substituted as counterfeit forest tea material. And according to a rough estimate by Zhang Yi and his clients, the annual output of Yiwu’s forest tea was less than 100 tons, and around 300 tons if terrace tea was included, but in the market there was 3000 tons of “authentic Puer tea from Yiwu!” It is very difficult for the ordinary consumer to identify authentic Yiwu tea.

With a pile of maocha in front of the buyer, first of all he must carefully check the tea’s appearance. At this stage, some people, such as Wen, were able to determine the origin and quality of the tea. According to their knowledge, if it was from forest tea, its leaf and stem would be larger, with tiny “fur” on the back of the leaf. But according to some versions, terrace tea could have the same good appearance, or perhaps even look much better, if it had been grown with fertilizer (Figure 2.10). Therefore, the final decision relied more on taste differentiation. As long as possible, the buyer would sit down to infuse and have a test drink by himself. For taste, both good forest tea and terrace tea
had sweetness after bitterness. But the degree of the forest tea’s lingering after-taste was said to be much better than that of the terrace tea (watch Film 4 on DVD 1 ■).

A second test of “authenticity” involved selecting maocha that was grown within the area of Yiwu. Wen declared that Yiwu tea was one of his favorite types of Puer tea, and he appreciated very much its subtle flavor and lingering taste.\(^8\) If there was another maocha he liked but from outside of Yiwu, he would definitely process them separately and label each product with different regional names. This was expected by his clients, too. Most tea producers and traders agreed with this approach, at least in their formal claims. Strictly speaking, they also agreed that tea material from the other nearby five tea mountains should be separately processed. But mostly they acknowledged these tea mountains to be “brothers” of Yiwu since they had long been shared the same historical glory as the Six Great Tea Mountains. So if tea materials from these mountains were blended with that of Yiwu, it could be tolerated. However, what critical traders like Wen was strongly opposed to, was to blend the tea material of Yiwu with material from “non-brother” regions such as Jiangcheng (a county of Simao, north of Yiwu), Shangyong (another township of Mengla, south of Yiwu), and from across the national border in Laos (east of Yiwu) (see Figure 0.2 and Figure 1.8).

But in reality, the number of traders and processing units in Yiwu was increasing; the QS standard resulted in an enlarged production scale. Therefore, the maocha from Yiwu and the nearby tea mountains could not meet the requirements of local tea processors. As a result, many traders secretly brought maocha from non-brother regions but re-traded them in Yiwu as “authentic” Yiwu material. This adulteration further challenged differentiation skills.

The third level of “authenticity” for Wen was to select the maocha from a certain exact sub-tea mountain within Yiwu. In many local family houses, there was a map of the Six Great Tea Mountains, showing the location of tea resources, relics, the past caravan routes and the present transportation lines. The areas of Yiwu in this map were remapped in Wen’s mind as distinct tea areas according to trivial variations in taste determined by their distinct ecosystems. In this mental map, many areas of tea resources surrounding central Yiwu were disliked by Wen. Only one western area (Gaoshan village, inhabited by Yi tea growers), one northern area (Ding village, inhabited by

---

\(^{8}\) His original words in Chinese: 淡定天下，回味无穷 (dan ding tianxia, huiwei wuqiong, its blandness is unique; its after-taste lingers in the mind).
Yao), and one eastern area (Guafeng village, inhabited by Yao, very close to Laos) were highly appreciated by him (Figure 2.11 and 2.12). They were more sparsely populated and had more undisturbed forests. According to Wen, tea growers, whether Han or Yi and Yao, now used the same rough processing techniques to get maocha—he actually thought Han often did this much better than others—but, more crucially, the better ecosystem areas inhabited by Yi and Yao would definitely produce a superior quality of tea material. According to Wen, forest tea originating from these two areas had a unique cool taste, and had a much longer after-taste than that from other sub-mountains within Yiwu.

**Figure 2.11:** Tea area sketch map (originally by Zhang Yingpei) “remapped” by Wen. The green leaf marks the areas of tea resources. I have added the English labels. See also Figure 1.8.
Long before enough *maocha* was available and when the price was still unstable, Wen had visited the tea-growing villages several times, talking, negotiating and building a good relationship with the local Yi and Yao growers (watch Film 5 on DVD 2 about the story of Wen ■). He even made efforts to guide them in the rough production methods such as stir-frying and rolling. In early March I joined Wen and several of his guests from Guangdong on a visit to Gaoshan, the Yi village. These guests had previously bought Wen’s Puer tea made from Gaoshan’s tea material and they now wanted to have a personal look at the place. Wen took them to visit the tall tea trees of Gaoshan, and also took them to one of his local acquaintances for a rest. The master, Xiao Hu, kindly served tea. Wen praised the tea taste highly. He declared that it was exactly the *maocha* he would collect. Later the family prepared lunch and invited everyone to join. The guests felt embarrassed that they were not paying. But Wen spoke on behalf of the master and invited them to eat, and he said that his guests should make themselves feel at home here. Before leaving, Wen reminded Xiao Hu not to do any pruning of the tea
trees\textsuperscript{9} and not to mix any terrace tea with forest tea. He said that once sufficient \textit{maocha} was prepared, he would immediately come to buy from him at their negotiated price.

At the end of April, when Wen decided to begin buying \textit{maocha} in earnest, I followed him again to Gaoshan. On the way to the village I was told that price of the \textit{maocha} would be 430 RMB per kilogram, as had been negotiated by Wen and the growers. This was a little higher than the average price of \textit{maocha} in the central area of Yiwu. But Wen said it was worthwhile since Gaoshan’s \textit{maocha} was better and its processing technique had been improved. He hinted that this improvement was largely due to his teaching.

When we got to the same family house, Xiao Hu’s father and brother brought out three big bags of \textit{maocha}. Xiao Hu happened to be not at home that day. Wen very carefully checked them one by one, looking, smelling and turning the bottom part over to the top. When checking one bag, Wen suddenly frowned because he found that there was some terrace tea mixed in it. Faced with Wen’s confidence, Xiao Hu’s father could not deny the fact, but said there was only a little terrace tea and that actually it was good quality. He said that the mixing was only a small mistake made by his wife. Wen tried his best to restrain his feelings, repeating the requests that he had made on his earlier visit. However, Wen really lost his temper later when a new price of 460 RMB, rather than the 430 RMB previously agreed, was demanded.

Xiao Hu’s father explained that this new price was now being charged by many families in Gaoshan. Wen exclaimed and shook his head. The previous oral agreement was broken and it seemed that the trade would be terminated. Xiao Hu’s father kept silent but would not lower his price, whatever the complaints expressed by Wen. As I understood later, if Wen did not buy at this moment, the \textit{maocha} would easily be sold to another trader. Also it could make the future price even harder to predict. And rejecting the price would mean breaking the trade relationship with Xiao Hu’s family.

Xiao Hu’s father made a small concession, saying that the bag mixed with terrace tea could have the old price of 430 RMB per kilogram, but the other two bags would definitely be sold at the higher price. Wen thought for a while, writing something in his notebook. Finally he accepted. The \textit{maocha} was weighed. The price was calculated. The

\textsuperscript{9} According to Wen, without pruning, the tea trees grow more slowly and therefore there are more rich substances in the taste.
three bags of tea were carried to Wen’s car. Finally Wen left without further conversation with Xiao Hu’s family.

On the way back to Yiwu, Wen told me that something similar had happened before in the Ding village inhabited by Yao, where he had donated many study items to the local primary school. These people, Wen admitted, had been poor for a long time, but their situation was getting better and better because of Puer tea. How could they be so greedy? He thought he had treated them fairly. As for Xiao Hu’s family, he had deposited some money with them many days ago as a promise that he would definitely buy their *maocha*. What could he do? The process of dealing with these people, he said, was really “a battle of wits and bravery.”

Some other traders told me similar stories of adulteration and cheating. Like Wen, they were fond of Yiwu’s Puer tea, but they found that it was getting more and more difficult to deal with some of the locals. They said that whether the *maocha* sellers were Han or other ethnic groups, they seldom made concessions on price once they became engaged in the tea business. Some locals even admitted that some Yiwunese did act badly, and someone told me that even tea from relatives could not be trusted. Luo Deshou, an old man in his eighties who had been a caravan driver to Laos and Thailand commented vividly: “There are inauthentic people, and there is inauthentic tea. You’d be cheated if you are not well known to people.”10 One trader from Kunming, as a result of being “seriously cheated,” had quit Yiwu and turned to other nearby tea mountains for his tea trade. He felt that Yiwu was a place with “serious social problems.”

Summing up all the different aspects, these social problems reflected the highly packaged profile of Yiwu and the extraordinary increase in the tea price. That is, the more famous the place was, the higher its tea price became, the more cheating happened, and also there was more struggle over “authentic” human relationships. Among the various traders, Wen was outstanding in his excellent skills in tea differentiation. Although the tea price grew incredibly high and the competition became intense, Wen had hoped to succeed based on his own ability. That is, however complicated the *jianghu* of Puer tea in Yiwu was, Wen, like the *xiake* (Chinese knight-errant), believed that he could solve problems based on his personal skill. However, trading tea was far more complicated than just differentiating tea. Being trusted by his stable and

---

10 The words in Chinese: “人有假人，茶有假茶，人不熟（么）会上当” (Baipuzi 2008).
discerning clients, he tried his best to build trusting relationships with the local tea producers, since authenticity of the tea relied on the authenticity of the human relationship. However, being unable to control the unstable value of the tea, he found it difficult to keep a stable business relationship with his tea providers. However hard he tried, to get one hundred percent authentic tea material was only an ideal. Under the high bloom of Puer tea, it was harder to obtain perfect tea material. Business relationships became unstable, and it was not easy to fix them once they were broken. Finding authentic Yiwu Puer tea went beyond the skill of tea differentiation and became a struggle over human relationships.

**Struggling for the Authentic Yiwu**

Besides collecting “authentic” Yiwu Puer tea, all visitors were also eager to see the “authentic” Yiwu. In 2005 Yiwu was declared to be one of the Special Tourism Villages of Yunnan Province, as part of a program to guide more tourists to small places in Yunnan with specific cultural attractions. The “authentic” image of Yiwu was communicated to many visitors prior to their journey, mostly from mass-media advertising or popular literature. It almost became a kind of pilgrimage for them to visit Yiwu, which had been packaged as one of the hometowns of Puer tea, full of superior culture and nature.

However, very often when they unpacked it, they found it was not as perfect as when it was packaged. The contrast between the propaganda and the experience, between the imagination and the reality, between the perfected past and the uneven present, led to great disappointment and even anger for the visitors. The root cause of their disappointment was the transformed image of Yiwu which occurred as Puer tea developed toward modern production standards and an extraordinarily elevated value.

I met a woman from Guangzhou. She didn’t conceal that she was a very nostalgic person. Before the journey, she had imagined that she could sit on the flagstones of the Tea-Horse Road in Yiwu with fantasies about the caravans and the ringing of their bells. But the reality was, those flagstones, the so-called Tea-Horse Road, had been mostly destroyed and everywhere there was construction and dust. Many old houses were destroyed, too. Most of the aged and valuable things in Yiwu, to her, were not preserved well at all. When discussing this, we were sitting in the newly built tea museum in Yiwu, which collected and displayed old-style implements relevant to tea processing and
transport. To her, the exhibition made the relics seem dead. She had hoped to see them in their original places. This is what Marilyn Ivy (1995: 10) is referring to when she says that “the loss of the nostalgia – that is, the loss of the desire to long for what is lost because one has found the lost object – can be more unwelcome than the original loss itself.”

These complaints were echoed by another trader, Sin, from Kunming. He had been to Yiwu several times in the past three years. He thought that the image of Yiwu was becoming worse and worse. He could not control his anger because even more modern architecture and new construction had emerged in the old area. These new things, to him, had destroyed the “harmony” of the old street and he thought that they conflicted very much with the traditional roofs. He took a series of photos and called them “inharmonious” (bu hexie, 不合谐) pictures of Yiwu (Figure 2.13 and 2.14). According to those who made these sorts of complaints, the inharmonious things were largely due to the requirements of the QS standard, and also to the lack of a unitary development plan for the whole Yiwu.11

A television crew from Guangdong came to Yiwu. The sad state of the old street defeated their enthusiasm for work. But they had to continue the program as planned, and they had to shoot a scene of how the caked Puer tea was processed in the traditional way under a traditional roof. Unfortunately, that day they could not find a family who was processing tea around the old street. Most families who used to make tea there in their houses had moved to one of the new tea factories, which did not fit with the requirements of the film crew. There were still a few families who processed tea in the old street, such as Mr. He and his neighbor Mr. Li, but unfortunately they didn’t plan to process tea that day. Finally Mr. Li kindly promised to arrange a special processing if the crew really needed it. This became their only choice, although the crew secretly discussed that they were not satisfied with the inside layout of Mr. Li’s house because modern elements had been added. The filming caused a small panic, and at that moment it was suddenly realized by those present that the “tradition” of Yiwu had been seriously damaged.

---

11 Other research has also provided cases to show that tourism is being more and more looked upon as a culture “destroyer,” see Oakes (1997), Hillman (2003).
Figure 2.13: “Inharmonious” picture (a) taken by Sin. The house on the left is the original site of an old tea brand. The descendents rented it to a Cantonese tea company and built a new house on the right. Sin sees the newly constructed house as “inharmionous.”

Figure 2.14: “Inharmonious” picture (b) taken by Sin. He thought the “blue roofs,” the newly built processing units as required by QS, were occupying more and more spaces of Yiwu.
Besides expecting to see an authentic image of Yiwu, travelers also expected to collect authentic Puer tea, a necessary part of the authentic Yiwu. However, not only the dream of having a nostalgic tour was destroyed, but also the quality of the tea products was in doubt. Although clean processing and safe drinking was ensured by the QS standards for fine production, ironically however the quality was still suspected and these doubts were traced back to the prior procedure, the rough production. Most visitors who had witnessed the process of rough production, tea frying, rolling and drying, began complaining. They said this was not as wonderful as described in the propaganda at all, but very rough and simple. It could not rival the delicate and complex procedures used to make Longjing or Tieguanyin in eastern China. These complaints deepened when they found improper or inconsistent methods of rough production that didn’t follow the “authentic” descriptions given in guidebooks or told to them by certain tea experts. This led to further hostility towards the issue of QS. As one traveler from Beijing commented, “It is ironic that the government took great effort to ensure the cleanliness of fine production but they don’t care about rough production. I think rough production is more important and the quality of maocha is the key node for the whole production of Puer tea.”

When the tea price rose quickly during the spring of 2007, many visitors were informed that some significant changes were happening in the tea fields of Yiwu: plenty of pesticide was being applied, especially on the closely-planted terrace tea; fertilizers were increasingly used to speed up the tea growing; some farmers worked on the tea plants over diligently, regardless of the common sense that tea leaves should not be picked so often or it would result in an insipid taste; and large areas of forest were being cut down or burnt in order to establish more tea plantations. All these problems of ecological destruction were attributed to the excessive blooming of the Puer tea business.

And finally what made ordinary travelers struggled with more than anything else, like the traders, was the crisis in trust between people. They had never been given suggestions in any guidebooks on how to manage this.

Wang came to Yiwu, along with two of his friends, Feng and Zi, from Henan, a province in central China. They declared that their purpose was chaosheng (pilgrimage, 朝圣), and in Wang’s words it was to find out the truth about Puer tea in the hometown
of tribute Puer tea. I met them at a family house where Puer tea was served. Feng praised the tea in front of the master. He said that this might actually be the very authentic Puer tea of Yiwu, compared with the tea he had drunk at urban tea shops, which were branded with Yiwu’s name but were actually fake.

The next day I met this group of friends again at a restaurant. I heard that they were suspicious about the quality of the Puer tea served the day before by the local family. Knowing that I was doing research in Yiwu, Wang said he felt it was very necessary to tell me some facts that he had learnt from his days in Yiwu. He said he was disappointed about this place, especially the people. Here is a selection from what he said:

Even at the origin of the tea plants, the hometown of tribute Puer tea, I still could not find the truth about it. Although the trip does give me opportunities to taste some comparatively pure Yiwu tea, I still could not tell what on earth good Puer tea is. The criteria is in chaos even in the tea field, no better than the situation in the urban market. Most locals are hospitable and honest, if you don’t mention tea business. But because of the increasing value of Puer tea, the good tradition of the locals is lost. Everyone here is after profit via Puer tea. There is little clean earth in Yiwu. I had been delegated by several friends in Henan to buy some excellent Yiwu Puer tea and take it back. However, traveling around Yiwu these days I have been cheated, which I realized in hindsight. Different grades of maocha were blended to sell without this being declared. How could I tell my friends that I could not find authentic Puer tea in Yiwu? Henanese used to drink more Maojian [a sort of green tea]. It is complicated to identify, too. But if you go to its hometown, something clear and clean would be discovered. I was wondering why the same proper ways for Puer tea do not exist in its hometown.

Like Wang, many travelers came to suspect the quality of Puer tea that they had bought in Yiwu. Similar to what they had experienced in urban markets, ninety percent of Puer tea products bought in Yiwu and marked as “authentic forest tea of Yiwu” were later found to be more like terrace tea material from the same region or, even worse, blended terrace tea material from somewhere far away. Worst of all, bad material with bad processing, which resulted in an unpleasant taste, was still declared to be something
“authentic.” As Wang commented further, “what sense would it be for me to buy piles of bad quality raw Puer tea, store it and wait for its aged value? It would only waste both my money and my time.” Indeed, consumers had been told not only that “the longer Puer tea is stored, the better taste it will have,” but also “only authentic Puer tea made with good material plus proper processing is worth storing.” So if the raw material was not authentic, it wouldn’t turn out as valuable as Tongqing and Songpin Puer tea even if it was stored for seventy years.

Therefore, while worrying about the ruined virtues of the local producers, visitors to Yiwu were actually worrying about both the present and the future authenticity of the tea products, forgetting that they themselves were also significant actors in weaving the fetishism of Yiwu’s Puer tea and hence were also actors in determining the level of trust in trading relationships.

**Conclusion: Original Taste and Authentic Relationships**

So, the authentic status of Yiwu, which had been packaged by both locals and nonlocals via deduction and imagination, became blemished and inauthentic when it was unpacked as the tea trade bloomed. This process parallels the story of milk in America, written by E. Melanie Dupuis (2002), where everything true in the “progress story” becomes untrue in the “downfall story.” In the former story, milk is imbued with various positive virtues and is related to the pure pastoral landscape; but in the latter story many aspects of its quality came to be suspected and significant doubts emerged about whether or not to drink it. These two stories, suggests Dupuis, display updated social understanding about modernity, purity and perfection, and are intrinsically about the updated politics of American identity. The story of milk covered the past one hundred and fifty years, whereas the packaging and unpackaging of Puer tea has occurred in only about five years. The creation of authenticity and the emergence of anxiety about this authenticity happened very quickly.

According to Walter Benjamin (1969), in the West people didn’t have the concept of originality until modern times, namely the nineteenth century industrial revolution when mechanical reproduction made copying possible. Of course, Benjamin notes that manual copying also took place in the past, but he suggests that with manual copying it was easier to identify the original from the copy. He sees the rise of modern techniques, which generated mass printing, photography and film, as the crucial changing force.
These techniques broke the singular form of things and gave rise to worries about forgery. Following Benjamin, other western scholars also see the concern with authenticity as being tied to a rising modernity, the western notion of individualism and to the emergence of private property (Trilling 1974; Handler 1986).

This view is persuasive for the Western case, and especially for the specific period Benjamin refers to, but it may need to be revised for the Chinese case, especially for the current social and cultural context that has generated Puer tea’s popularity. Beth E. Notar (Notar 2006a) has challenged Benjamin and other previous scholars on this issue. By exploring the flourishing of fake goods in the markets of Dali, Yunnan, in the 1990s, she argues that concern about authenticity is not necessarily linked to modernity, but more specifically a result of increased commercialization which can be traced back in China a very long way. Nor does she think anxiety about authenticity is always linked to the Western concern with individualism or the “authentic self,” but is more concerned with the “true presentation of self and objects in the world” (Notar 2006a: 71).

I agree with Notar that forgery started earlier in China and has repeatedly appeared in several periods, often associated with high commercialization. As other scholars on China have mentioned, forgery was serious in the thirteenth century (Song Dynasty) and the late sixteenth to early seventh century (Ming Dynasty) when counterfeits emerged in the flourishing markets and connoisseurs competed to collect antiques (Jones, Craddock, and Barker 1990; Clunas 1991; Brook 1998). And notably these counterfeits were mostly hand-made, but they were often hard to distinguish from the original items. In Puer tea’s case, too, counterfeiting of the authentic had appeared in the mid-eighteenth century (Zhang Hong 1998: 369) and also the early twentieth century (Colquhoun 1900: 388), and this was why the producers of Yiwu stressed authenticity with special icons in their Tongqing or Songpin product descriptions. Echoing the previous periods, the recent blooming of the Puer tea trade aroused people’s anxiety about authenticity. This is not because of mechanical reproduction, which only affects the speed of producing forgeries and relates to some people’s preference for handcrafted rather than mechanical products. What people really worry about is that raw Puer tea is not being made according to the new authenticity standards, nor consistent with the original aura—though many of them are also handcrafted—and hence may not be able to transform into valuable aged Puer tea at some time in the future.
After being exhausted by Puer tea counterfeits in the cities, urban people launched their journeys to Yiwu, which, in their imagination, should have more truth, contain more authenticity and original aura, and include more frank and transparent interpersonal relationships. However, all these imaginations about originality are contested: by the modern production regulations which contrast to the traditional way; by the unexpected rising tea price and the fierce competition; and finally by the difficulties involved in negotiating complex social relations. All these factors have seriously affected the implementation of the emerging connoisseurship standards involved in finding authentic Yiwu Puer tea, and all of them embody Notar's observations about rising commercialization.

But I don't agree with Notar attributing concerns about authenticity in China to a concern about the social presentation of self but disregarding what she sees as more Western-style individualism. To me, these two aspects are inseparable, and individualism, though not being a dominant theme throughout China's history, does exist and is very evident in certain contexts. As Clunas (1991: 66) shows in relation to the Ming period (the late sixteenth to early seventh century), there was concern with individualism when trademarks were popularly used for many goods in order to protect intellectual property. And in contrast to the Maoist era that demanded unification, the reform era allows more space for variation, and self-presentation. In the process of learning from the West in order to make China move on from backwardness, new individual identities come on the scene. These are often embodied in the freedom of consumption choices (Croll 2006). When the jianghu actors, whether those living in reality or created in martial arts fiction, are mentioned, a sense of individualism is clearly evident. At the very least these jianghu actors stand for the desire of many common Chinese to act bravely against unsatisfying situations and find one's own solutions with one's own special skills.

So, rather than drawing boundaries between self-presentation and individualism, I want to explain the existing authenticity anxiety in relation to Puer tea by locating rising commercialization in the jianghu context. Once all the factors affecting the "original aura" of producing Puer tea are read as the social distinctions and counter-forces among jianghu actors, then it could be argued that such authenticity anxiety is actually rooted in people's conflict of desires, activated in the reform era and by rising commoditization. On the one hand there is the desire to achieve one's own authentic identity and authentic
lifestyle by searching for authentic Puer tea; on the other hand there is the desire to obtain wealth via Puer tea trading and investment, which then often easily leads to illegal counterfeiting and cheating. It is when these two kinds of desire meet that the jianghu of Puer tea comes to be full of risk and suspicion, and hence the anxiety about finding authentic Puer tea goes beyond technical factors and transforms into anxiety about the struggles of human negotiation.

These contests of desire vividly display what I call the jianghu counter-forces, which are even more reinforced by the ambiguity of formal regulations. By ambiguous, I mean that on the one hand there is a lack of formal regulation to define the exact authenticity of Puer tea and to stop counterfeiting. This creates a vacant arena that multiple jianghu voices can fill, and the connoisseurship standard becomes one prominent voice arising from the popular realm (minjian, 民间). On the other hand, however, there are formal regulations like the QS, which, though unable to solve problems efficiently, try to unify all voices and use authoritative power to fulfill its application. This attempt, though not directly resisted, is actually deeply contested by the other actors, whether the local producers who felt that an added burden was placed on them, or the tourists who saw QS as a modern destroyer of the original aura, or the connoisseur traders whose “taste” standards diverge so far from that of the state. Their complaints, worries, self-managed solutions (including forgery), actually become the embodiments of the multiple counter-forces. These contested desires, multiple voices and counter-forces, I argue, are crucial in understanding the risk, counterfeiting, and authenticity anxiety in the tea mountains of Yiwu when its tea economy bloomed.
Summer

Figure 3.0: Tea Stir-frying in Yiwu.
Chapter 3 “Yunnan: The Home of Puer Tea”

Government has been the most powerful driving force in heating up Puer tea...It is the most successful packaging of Chinese tea in recent years, which lies in the fact that Puer tea’s history and culture has broader spaces for imagination compared with other kinds of tea (Tang Jia-guang, Zou Li, and Wang Xun 2007b: 30).

Name Change

Sitting in Yiwu in March 2007, I often heard both locals and outsiders talk about an upcoming event, which was regarded as a particular factor that increased Puer tea’s price in Yunnan that year. Another tea area to the north of Xishuangbanna called Simao, a sub-district of Yunnan, was going to change its name to “Puer” on 8 April 2007.1 “Puer” would become a confusing term, because it would mean three different things: the general name of the tea; the name of the re-named sub-district as well as its capital city which were both called “Simao” in the past; the name of the town in Simao which had formerly been called “Puer” but now had to yield to the new “Puer” and rename itself “Ninger” (Figure 3.1 and 3.2). (To avoid ambiguity in this thesis, I will stick to the old terms and will note when I use the new ones.)

1 This is a process that has also happened elsewhere, for example in Shangri-La as mentioned by Ben Hillman (2003) and also described by Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein (2006).
Puer tea had been long associated with a specific place, the third in the above list. It had been a famous goods distribution and taxation centre in southern Yunnan since at least the early seventeenth century when it was under the authority of the Dai state of Jinghong (Fang Guoyu 2001: 427-428; Xie Zhaozhi 2005: 3; Ma Jianxiong 2007: 563). And that’s where the generic name “Puer tea” came from. In Chapter 1 I explained that in 1729 the Qing (1636-1912) established Puer Prefecture whose administration included today’s Simao Sub-district and eastern Xishuangbanna. The capital city of the prefecture was Puer. And soon after the General Tea Bureau (zong cha dian, 总茶店) was established in Simao to be in charge of tea affairs including taxation and tribute. The basic tea material produced in the Six Great Tea Mountains (in today’s Xishuangbanna and then part of Puer Prefecture) had to be taken for fine processing in Puer or Simao before being sent to Beijing as tribute.

With the change of regime from the Qing to the Republic of China (1912-1949) and to the People’s Republic of China (1949-present), there have been many administrative changes in this region, which makes the present boundaries of Simao (sub-district) and Xishuangbanna quite different from the past. For a long time, the capital of Simao sub-district had been Puer but in 1955 it was moved to Simao. In 1993 Simao (sub-district) was upgraded from a county to a city in Yunnan province. In January 2007 it was approved by the State Council of China to be renamed as Puer city.²

One day before its name change I arrived in Simao. The streets had been cleaned up, billboards were hung, and neon lights were put on in honour of the coming events. Tea shops were easily seen, all selling Puer tea. In local bakeries there were freshly made tea snacks. Small gardens in public squares used sculptures to display the tea serving ceremony. Being recognized as a non-local, the owner of the restaurant where I ate, recommended that I visit the 10,000 mu of tea gardens, a famous tourist site for tea in Simao. The importance of tea to Simao was fully on display (Figures 3.3 and 3.4). In the local government’s development plan, tea is the number one pillar of industry followed by forestry, mining and hydropower (Shen Peiping 2007).

On 8 April 2007, a large ceremony was held in Simao celebrating its name change. Ethnic performances were displayed, showing Simao’s long history of utilizing tea resources by indigenous ethnic groups such as the Bulang, Hani and Dai. A series of

² To learn more about the detailed administrative changes of this area, see Pu-Erh Special Issue (2007b), EBSAA (1996).
other activities followed in the next few days. Conferences with government officials, tea experts and celebrities were held. Puer tea games, Puer tea auctions, Puer tea trade fairs and Puer tea serving ceremonies were conducted (Figures 3.5). Among all these activities, there was a central ritual: to welcome the Golden Melon Tribute Puer tea “back home.” This tea was said to have been 150 years old. Weighing 2.5 kilograms, it had long been kept in the Palace Museum of Beijing as a tribute relic to the Qing royal family. It was unveiled at the name change ceremony and then publicly exhibited for the next few days before being taken back to Beijing. Thousands of people went to the exhibition, curious and excited to see this royal relic originating from Yunnan (Figure 3.6). Meanwhile in the tea trade fair, new imitation products with the same shape and weight were sold for very high prices (9999 RMB for each piece weighing 2.5 kilograms). There was a limited supply of only 999 pieces (Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.3: Sculptures in the public garden of Simao.

---

3 This tea is either called jingua gong cha (金瓜贡茶), as it looks like a golden melon, or rentou gong cha (人头贡茶), as it also looks like the head of a man, or together as rentou jingua gong cha (人头金瓜贡茶), Man Head – Golden Melon Tribute Tea.
**Figure 3.4:** 10,000 mu terrace tea land in Simao.

**Figure 3.5:** Tea serving performance at the tea trade fair in Simao.
Figure 3.6: The Golden Melon Tribute Puer tea. The round-roof building represents the Palace Museum, where the royal families used to stay.

Figure 3.7: Imitation Golden Melon tea. The note on the white paper says “no touching the precious merchandise.”
Many people, including me, initially could not help feeling that it was absurd for Simao to declare itself to be the home of the Golden Melon tribute tea, as it had been generally accepted that its basic tea material originated in Yibang, one of the Six Great Tea Mountains in Xishuangbanna. Many people of Xishuangbanna were angry over the name change, since “Puer” had been a common term used by many tea regions of Yunnan, and they felt uneasy that their tribute glory had been suddenly appropriated.

However, staying in Simao I found that the city was not launching this ritual without significant preparation. In fact, a discourse legitimating and perfecting this name change had been developed. This was intensively exemplified in a special issue of a magazine also called *Pu-Erh*, published in April 2007 by the Simao government (Figure 3.8).4

![Figure 3.8: Cover of the Pu-Erh Special Issue in April 2007. The yellow characters are a summary of the contents. From top to bottom, they are: The King is coming back—from Palace Museum to Puer; All Puer tea gathers in Puer; Puer tea is distinguished for its strong taste; Carnival is celebrated at the Tea City; Inexhaustible wealth is coming.](image)

4 “Puer” is according to Chinese pinyin, and “Puerh” is according to the Wade-Giles system.
First, historical details were presented to show that the fine processing for the Golden Melon tribute tea took place in Puer before it was sent to Beijing. This proved that regardless of where the tea resources were from, Puer was the necessary assembling and processing place for the final tea products. Hence, Simao guarded an important historical place for the circulation of Puer tea as a tribute and commodity (Huang Yan and Yang Zhijian 2007: 14-17).

Second, a very important historical event in the local administration was highlighted. In 1729 Puer Prefecture was established by Qing Manchu in Puer and since then the eastern Mekong of Xishuangbanna had been under its administration. Yibang and the whole Six Great Tea Mountains, now part of Xishuangbanna, were actually part of Puer Prefecture, which later became Simao. Therefore, as argued in the special issue, it was absolutely right for Simao to declare itself to be the home of the tribute tea. And it was emphasized that the Yiwu tea family Cheshun Hao, which had been given the prized brand inscribed with Rui Gong Tian Chao (瑞贡天朝, tribute tea to the emperor), was within the administration of Puer Prefecture at that time. It indicates that although all the tribute tea did have a specific small home, Yiwu or the Six Great Tea Mountains, they were more importantly part of a larger home: the old Puer Prefecture, the past Simao, and the renamed Puer City (Huang Yan and Yang Zhijian 2007: 14-17).

Third, even before the name change a view had developed that many had been mistaken in saying that “Puer tea was never grown in Puer” but was just named after the place.⁵ Proof was found to show that, in fact, Puer and Simao both used to plant and produce Puer tea (Huang Guishu 2002; Shen Peiping 2008). According to some local tea experts, such as Zhou Deguang whom I interviewed, there is a whole chain of tea trees that prove that Simao is one of the world’s origins of tea: the wild tea tree in Qianjiazhai, 2700 years old; the transitional one in Bangwai, 1700 years old; and the domesticated one in Jingmai, 1000 years old. All are located within Simao (Figure 3.1 and 3.2). All proved that Simao is a very important origin of the production of Puer tea (see also Huang Yan and Yang Zhijian 2007: 17).

Apart from the above reasoning, Simao’s status was elevated in the magazine by being linked to the tea consumption of the imperial household. For instance, historical records

---

⁵ This was initially stated by Ran Fu during the Qing Dynasty. In Chinese: “所谓普洱茶者，非普洱府界内所产，盖产于府属之思茅厅界也” (Ran Fu 1981 [1825]: 396). It was acknowledged and cited by lots of later works, see Li Fuyi (2000 [1939]: 57) and Zhang Shungao (1988: 79).
were unearthed to show that Puer tea was cherished by the imperial family of Qing; it was praised by Emperor Qianlong in a poem; it was gifted to George III in 1792. Being intimate with royalty had always been considered by the Chinese to be a supreme glory, and when the royally cherished substance returned to its origin, the origin was also glorified and became superior. At this point, the Golden Melon’s “returning home” was, in a way, analogous to the imperial concubine’s home visit during the feudal period of China, as described in the famous novel Dream of Red Mansions.  

Moreover, the royally cherished consumption was reproduced in contemporary tastings. The story of drinking the Golden Melon written by a professor of Yunnan Agricultural University was included in the following issue of the same magazine to prove that this 150 year-old tea still tasted good with chen yun (陈韵, aged appeal) (Shao Wanfang 2007). In comparison, tribute Longjing (龙井, Dragon Well green tea from east China) of the same age had become nothing but trash. Once again the profile of the original place stood out, and the long lasting value of the aged tea obviously encouraged people to buy and store more Puer tea originating from Simao or Yunnan.

All these testimonials made the welcoming of the Golden Melon tea a very important ritual. It expressed the legitimacy of the name change from Simao to Puer, and it supported the declaration that Simao/Puer was the authentic hometown of Puer tea (Zheng Yongjun 2007: 9).

In response, the Xishuangbanna government commented on Simao’s name change as “good,” but with sarcasm. Huang Shan, the vice-governor of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, said that as a result of Simao’s propaganda, Xishuangbanna would also benefit, since they were both important production areas. She mentioned this to me in early March 2007 when I participated in a visit to one of the tea mountains in Menghai, Xishuangbanna, where a ceremony of “Protecting the Old Tea Trees” was launched by the Xishuangbanna government. When we arrived at the central part of the tea mountain and saw many tall tea trees flourishing, she said, “Now you can understand where the hometown of Puer tea should be; whether or not it is called Puer,

---

6The Chinese novel Dreams of Red Mansions was written by Cao Xueqin during the eighteenth century. There is one scene “Yuanfei Xingqing” (元妃省亲) describing that the concubine Jia Yuanfei, a daughter from the Jia family, went back home for a short visit, kindly approved by the emperor.

7There was an alternative claim that such aged Puer tea had become tasteless, quoted from some other tea experts who had participated in tasting the Golden Melon, see Deng Shihai (2004: 15).
it is always our Xishuangbanna whose tea price is the most expensive in Yunnan every year.”

Shortly after Simao’s name change, Xishuangbanna took the opportunity of the Dai New Year in mid April 2007 to launch a ritual home-coming of another tribute tea, a brick of Puer tea originating in Yiwu. At the same time a major forum on Puer tea was held in Jinghong, its capital city (see also Figure 3.9).

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 3.9:** The Xishuangbanna government started using Dai characters on tea packs in 2007.

Various maps came out in advertising, tea packs and tea houses, showing alternative ideas about the home of Puer tea. Some showed Puer as the very original point and disseminating center of Puer tea (Figure 3.10). While in Jinghong, I saw another very imaginative map in a tea house created by the owner, a local tea trader. With an exaggerated scale and intentionally selected details, Xishuangbanna takes up most of the tea territory (Figure 3.12).
**Figure 3.10:** A map of Yunnan with Puer as the tea center (Zhou Hongjie 2004: 14). I have added the English labels.

**Figure 3.11:** Tea caravan in 2005. Source: *Baidu Website* (2006).
Figure 3.12: The map in a Jinhong tea house. I have added the English labels.

Figure 3.13: Caked Puer tea (400 grams) carried to Beijing by caravan in 2005. Source: Baidu Website (2006).
Thus the home of Puer tea was mapped by different people’s selected imaginations. What’s more, this sort of imagination didn’t only exist in people’s minds, but was developed at a deeper level—on foot. As an imitation of the past caravans, a modern caravan started from Simao in May 2005 toward Beijing. Over five months, 120 mules and horses with 68 drivers in ethnic costumes walked through six provinces, covering 4,000 kilometers before finally arriving in Beijing (Figure 3.11, 3.13). The Puer tea carried by the caravan was auctioned there at a surprising price. For example, seven 2.5 kilogram pieces were sold for from 28,000 to 120,000 RMB; one stack (seven caked pieces, each of 357 grams) purchased from the caravan and donated back by the famous actor Zhang Guoli was auctioned at 1,600,000 RMB. In the following year, another new caravan set out from Yiwu toward Beijing. In Yiwu there is a well-known site where the past caravans used to assemble and start their journey. Since the start of the new caravan, this site has become an important part of the local tea tour. In various ways, home was represented with royal approval and the new proof of this royal linkage was imagined in rituals and maps and practiced in mind and on foot.

This competition for being the origin of Puer tea actually echoed earlier debates about the origin of tea itself. Since the early nineteenth century there had been a debate, lasting for over one hundred years about whether China or India (Assam, in particular) was the birthplace of tea (Baildon 1877; Ukers 1935; Zhu Zizhen 1996). Partly it was resolved in favor of the former, with more aged and wild tea trees found in China. And the argument in favour of India was considered to be an attempt by the British to boost its colony’s tea industry. Afterwards, there was another debate on which part of China, tea is indigenous to. Finally, it came to be widely acknowledged that the tea varieties in other parts of China are mainly of small leaf tea (thea. sinensis), and that they originated, evolved and disseminated from the large leaf tea (thea assamica) of Yunnan (Chen Chuan 1984; Chen Xingtian 1994; Evans 1992). Decades later it was the turn of some sub-regions within Yunnan to argue about which is the authentic home of Puer tea when Puer tea became popular and profitable.

From the side of both Simao and Xishuangbanna, this battle about the tea’s origin seemed significant. It would directly determine who was better known to the world, and

---

8 This caravan was co-organized by the Youth Foundation of Yunnan (云南省青基会), the Tea Association of Yunnan (云南省茶业协会) and the Commercial Club of Yunnan (云南省茶叶商会). According to media reports, all the revenue from the auction was donated to the Hope Project of China, a foundation that patronizes education in undeveloped areas of China (Rifttea Website 2007).
in turn who would attract more traders, investors and tourists. And in the process of arguing, both sides often stressed that “we must respect history,” which implied that there existed only one version of the authentic narrative.

But from the provincial point of view, this battle seemed unnecessary. “It’s good,” commented some people because they thought the success of either side would bring benefits to Yunnan. “It’s bad,” said others who thought this was an unnecessary civil war because Simao and Xishuangbanna are both part of Yunnan. Actually, many people would not venture to judge which sub-district was the home of Puer tea, rather they said that Yunnan is the home of Puer tea, including all the sub-regions along the Mekong. What impressed me very much was my interview with Zeng Yunrong, the director of the Menghai Tea Association, a well-known expert on tea biology. I asked his opinion about Simao’s name change. He laughed and recalled a story: in one of his articles, he identified the production area of Puer tea as Xishuangbanna, Simao, Lincang and Dali. This, however, offended another two other areas, Baoshan and Dehong in west Yunnan, which have tea resources but were not included into Zeng’s article (See Figure 0.1). Finally Zeng revised the article and added these two, and Puer tea was given a broader scope (Zeng Yunrong 2004). Zeng’s action reflects the view of many people who consider Yunnan itself to be the center of Puer tea. It was following such logic that the 2008 national standard on assuring Puer tea’s geographical origins, put its production scope even more broadly; eleven sub-areas of Yunnan are all authorized as Puer tea production regions, including not only the regions along the Mekong in the south but also tea areas in western, eastern and central Yunnan (NBQIQC 2008). 9

The Puer tea battle between sub-districts of Yunnan never ends, with new historical “discoveries” or botanical proof. Nevertheless, there was a broad acceptance that Yunnan is the common home for all Puer tea. However, opinions diverged again when the development of Puer tea broke through the borders of Yunnan and challenged the position of other Chinese tea.

---

9 The eleven sub-areas are: Kunming, Chuxiong, Yuxi, Honghe, Wenshan, Simao, Xishuangbanna, Dali, Baoshan, Dehong, Lincang (see Figure 0.1).
Re-defining Puer Tea

When Puer tea became more prevalent, its exact definition became a matter of controversy. This controversy was launched by the tea academia of Yunnan and then reinforced by the provincial government.

As outlined in the Introduction, in the past Puer tea had been categorised as a fully post-fermented dark tea among the six main kinds of Chinese tea. From the early 2000s, some tea experts of Yunnan began to formally argue that Puer tea is not dark tea and should be independent from the other six categories (Su Fanghua 2002: 49-51; Mu Jihong 2004: 5; Zou Jiaju 2004: 9-10). The key reason, as explained by them, was that the post-fermentation of Puer tea uses a different procedure from that used for other dark teas. Other kinds of dark tea, such as the one produced in Hunan province, are post-fermented soon after rolling when the tea leaves are still moist; while Puer tea’s post-fermentation is not applied until after the tea leaves are dried. Furthermore, the Yunnanese experts pointed out that other kinds of dark tea are made from small or middle category tea leaves, but Puer tea must be made from Yunnan’s large category leaves.

This updated approach to tea definition was considered to be an important way of rescuing Puer tea from the chaotic situation in the market. As Zou Jiaju, the vice-head of the Yunnan Tea Association, stated:

Among Chinese tea, there has never been a tea like Puer tea whose perception is in such a chaos. Many incentives are about money. Some people impute the emergence of “fake Puer tea” to the social transformation in modernity. Besides this aspect, I suppose it is also because Puer tea has long been without an accurate definition among Chinese tea. Before its recent prevalence, it wasn’t really cared about, and in contempt it was wrongly categorized as dark tea. Perceptual mistakes cause chaos in actual trade. Other types of tea have had their clear identity and don’t have so many troubles. Only Puer tea is homeless, and has to live under another’s roof. The lack of its development is really due to its unclear identity and wrong definition (Zou Jiaju 2005: 135).

According to these suggestions, Chinese tea should be categorized into seven types, adding Puer tea as an additional one. This argument was not only concerned with Puer
tea's re-classification but it would also mean re-writing the whole system of categorizing Chinese tea, and therefore it was counter attacked by the tea academia from other provinces. In Zou's book, there is a debate between him and another tea scholar, a strong supporter of the traditional way of categorizing tea. Wang Dengliang, the head of the Tea Department of South China Agricultural University (in Guangzhou), whom I interviewed in April 2007, declared that he and other members of the tea academia would strongly disagree that Puer tea cannot fit within the existing system of categorization. He said changing the categories would result in chaos for the tea academy. And he stressed that Puer tea shares a lot of similarities in the production process with dark tea.

In fact, defining a tea was not just a matter for the tea academia. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, official government statements about Puer tea have been updated several times in order to catch up with the development of market conditions. Before the increase in demand for Puer tea, there were regulations about quality standards, rather than definitions, such as the first one enacted by the national government in about 1955. And the second quality standard was set by Yunnan Province in 1979 in order to be consistent with the emergence of the artificial fermentation technique that was invented in 1973 (Xu Yahe 2006: 129). The first official attempt at definition was issued in 2003 by the Standard Counting and Measuring Bureau of Yunnan Province. It defined Puer tea as follows:

Puer tea is made of large leaf tea material that has been sun-dried. The tea material should be produced within a certain area of Yunnan Province. The final product is loose or pressed tea via post fermentation. Its appearance is brown red; its tea brew is bright and dark red; it has an aged aroma; it tastes mellow, with sweetness after bitterness; after infusing, the tea leaves are brownish red (Xu Yahe 2006: 133).

In contrast to the academic mode of classification based on production technique, the government's regulation was more concerned with the origin of the tea material. It was characterized by a strong geographical sense. This became more prominent in the next updated version, enacted by the Yunnan Provincial Supervision Bureau of Technology and Quality in 2006:
Puer tea is the geographically marked product of Yunnan. It is made from large leaf tea material that has been sun-dried. The tea material is produced in tea areas of Yunnan whose conditions are suitable for producing Puer tea. After a certain special production process, the tea develops its unique characteristics. Puer tea is categorized as Puer sheng cha [raw Puer tea and aged raw Puer tea] and Puer shu cha [artificially fermented Puer tea] (Zhang Shungao and Su Fanghua 2007: 313).

Both definitions, from 2003 and 2006, emphasized “large leaf tea” (*thea assamica*), the tea category that is more distinctively Yunnanese than the “small leaf tea” (*thea.sinensis*) that is common in other tea areas of China. Compared with the 2003 version, the 2006 definition stressed more about the geographical boundary of Yunnan. Although it declared that it had drawn on academic insights, it was actually in contradiction with the academic approach. According to the tea academia, whether Puer tea is categorized as a dark tea or as an independent category, the definition is based on the production technique (Chen Chuan 1984: 238). That is, a certain type of production process shapes a certain kind of tea. Following this rule, as long as it is processed in the same way as that of Puer tea the final product can be Puer tea, regardless of the origin of the tea material.\(^{10}\)

When Puer tea became profitable, however, the academic definition became too broad according to the authorities in Yunnan. They worried that the fame of Yunnan’s Puer tea was being illegally exploited. Large amounts of low cost tea material, mostly small leaf tea such as that from Sichuan, Guangxi or Guangdong, were being carried into Yunnan or even processed locally to make Puer tea. All these products were branded with the name of authentic Yunnan’s Puer tea. This illegal and fake Puer tea, according to the authorities in Yunnan, was made from small tea leaf material, a very different category from the large tea leaf of Yunnan.

So why must Puer tea be made of large leaf tea? Zou Jiaju, the vice-head of the Yunnan Tea Association, uses an analogy with red wine to illustrate. To him, both good red wine and good Puer tea have a unique mellow taste and this mellow taste is developed from the astringent element. The more astringent the grape is, the more mellow the taste

\(^{10}\) But this classification approach also admits that tea material from a certain place can be more suitable for producing a certain kind of tea. For instance, it is acknowledged that the middle tea leaf category from Fujian or Taiwan is more ideal than the large leaf category of Yunnan for making oolong tea.
of the wine made from it; if the grape tastes sweet, it is no good for making wine. The same applies to Puer tea. Tea made from small leaf material is not astringent enough to develop a mellow taste. Only the large leaf one is time-tested, and would prove its vitality when it is aged, whether via natural or artificial fermentation (Zou Jiaju 2004: 98).

Yunnan is acknowledged as the home of large leaf tea, but it’s not the only area for this kind of tea. Large leaf tea material is also available in Guangxi, Hunan and Hainan, though they cannot rival Yunnan in terms of quantity. When the availability of large leaf tea in other areas was mentioned, supporters of Yunnan used unmovable biological resources from a certain geographical location as their explanation and argued that the large leaf category for Puer tea is shaped by the unique natural conditions of Yunnan that are different to the conditions in any other tea areas. In a series of articles talking about Puer tea’s value, Chen Jie, a researcher on microbiology, places great emphasis on “geographical value.” To him, this criterion could be an efficient way to distinguish whether or not a tea is authentic Puer tea:

Although those fake Puer tea made of non-Yunnanese tea material have reached a great resemblance, they still remain at an obvious disadvantage: they can’t be stored too long; Yunnan Puer tea’s quality will be improved as time goes by, but the fake Puer tea made of tea material outside of Yunnan would only become worse and worse (Chen Jie 2009).

According to these explanations and arguments, Puer tea would be authentic only when it could cope with long-term storage, and using this logic only tea material grown in Yunnan, the large-leaf category, could fulfill this task.

But there is one doubt left. What about the regions bordering Yunnan that share the same tea category as well as similar natural conditions? In Yiwu I have often observed that tea material from Phongsali in Laos easily crossed the border to Yiwu and became part of the raw material of “Yiwu’s authentic Puer tea.” This tea material is of the large leaf category and shares the Mekong as the mother river with the other main tea areas of Yunnan. When I raised this example to question the geographical classification of tea, the answer, from the perspective of the geographical supporters, was still “no.” They admitted that tea material from Laos, Vietnam or Burma shares many similarities with that of Yunnan, and using correct production techniques, it could be made into Puer tea
that no one could easily distinguish as being different. But, Xu Yahe, a tea expert from Kunming, emphasized, Puer tea does not only refer to a certain kind of tea with a certain production technique; nor is it simply based on a biological categorization; rather that it is a “historical geographical substance.” He reminded me about how Puer tea was named after a place, how Puer Prefecture was set by the Qing during the eighteenth century, and how all the tea gathered there must be taxed before being traded to other places. This, he argued, was a unique history belonging to Yunnan rather than to Laos or any other neighboring countries.

Xu’s argument seemed to be coming back to history as the key issue. At this stage, I realized that for many Yunnanese the definition of Puer tea did not only exist within the sphere of natural scientific knowledge. If that was the case the tea resource from Phongsali in Laos could be formally accepted as Puer tea. The fact was, when the natural science encountered embarrassment and could not properly identify Puer tea with the representation of Yunnan, history, another useful tool from the sphere of social scientific knowledge, came to give a hand.

Xu graduated from a tea college and had a rich experience in tea education and processing. Running a private tea factory kept him busy, but he said he was taking spare time to learn more about the history of Puer tea, which he increasingly realized was a very important issue. This reminded me of two sayings I often heard when people debated about Puer tea: “we must respect science,” and also “we must respect history.”

Then I asked Xu one more question. In many books the Golden Melon tribute tea is said to be made of middle and small leaf tea material from the Six Great Tea Mountains, but no one has argued that it’s not Puer tea. And quite often I had seen small leaf tea in the tea fields of Yiwu. Local people told me they were imported from Sichuan when tea planting was encouraged by the local government during the 1980s. According to the definitions of 2003 and 2006, only “large leaf category” could be used for Puer tea, but large leaf tea from beyond the boundary of Yunnan is excluded. So could this small leaf tea, originating from alien lands but now growing in the soil of Yiwu in Yunnan, really be used for Puer tea? This time Xu cited an old Chinese saying to answer me: “The mandarin planted in the south of Huai River is called a mandarin, but if transplanted to the north of Huai River, it would turn into a different kind of orange” (秦淮淮南则为桔，生
What he implied and emphasized was the importance of the soil that plants grow in rather than their original variety (see also Gao 2009: 193-194).

The definition of Puer tea, therefore, was shaped by a combination of factors: the production process, the basic species, the present geographical boundary, the past historical impact, the unique natural conditions, and the practical effect of the soil. As a matter of fact, in books written by tea experts, what is most commonly cited is the government definition in which “Yunnan” was the key word for Puer tea. In private I have heard from many tea experts that they did not agree with the government’s definition, whether the 2003 or the 2006 version, but not many stood out to declare their own views because that would endanger many profits. For example, someone who once publicly suggested that “raw tea material is not Puer tea” had been attacked fiercely on tea websites by numerous opponents who were running raw Puer tea businesses (Guo Yukuan 2007b).

**Tea Caravans**

While Simao and Xishuangbanna were arguing over the origin of Puer tea, Yunnan launched a series of events promoting Puer tea as a provincial representative in outside markets. Just as Simao used “welcoming tribute tea back home” as the key ritual in its name change, Yunnan used two important propaganda techniques to present itself. One was the promotion of cha ma gu dao (茶马古道), the Ancient Routes of Tea and Horses. The other was to re-define the position of Puer tea among Chinese tea. The concept yue chen yue xiang (越陈越香, the older the tea, the better its taste) was used as the key feature to link these two promotional techniques.

The term cha ma gu dao (Ancient Routes of Tea and Horses) was first proposed by several Yunnanese scholars, after they did a ninety-day investigation, mainly on foot, in 1989 around the triangle of Yunnan, Tibet and Sichuan. They found out that in the past there were two main transit lines starting from Sichuan and southern Yunnan towards Tibet. They argued that tea was the most important commodity carried along these routes by caravan, because Tibetans need to drink tea to help with the digestion of greasy food. Thus the term cha ma gu dao was proposed: cha is tea, ma is horse, and gu dao means ancient routes (Mu Jihong 1992). In the subsequent work of Mu Jihong (2003; 2004), who led the team, the concept of cha ma gu dao was further developed to include the various caravan routes connecting Yunnan and nearby Southeast Asian areas.
For example, starting from Yiwu, there used to be small branch routes to Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, all with tea as their main transport goods.\textsuperscript{11}

These views about the history of the caravan trade worked as a prelude to Puer tea’s forthcoming prevalence. It shed light on the geographic, economic and political role of Yunnan as an important middle ground between China and Southeast Asia since the fourth century BC (Yang Bin 2006). The role of \textit{cha ma gu dao} is summarized by Mu as:

\textit{Cha ma gu dao} is the ancient road that disseminated civilization, and also the channel through which commodities were exchanged; along this passage, China and the outside world communicated, ethnic groups migrated, Buddhism spread eastward, tours and expeditions were launched. We could say that it is an ancient road with the highest topography and the most complicated configuration in the world (Mu Jihong 2004: 26).

Since the early 2000s, numerous books, magazines, newspaper columns, web pages, and audio and video series have flourished, all talking about \textit{cha ma gu dao}. They were mostly composed by the local authors in Yunnan. While emphasizing \textit{cha ma gu dao} as an important passage, the authors emphasized that along this passage there were multiple natural landscapes in Yunnan, from the rainforest of Xishuangbanna in the south to the high snowy mountains in the north. There were also lively towns along the routes—Puer, Dali, Lijiang—which acted as distribution places for goods carried by the caravans. Along the routes there were also multiple ethnic groups such as Dai and Hani in Xishuangbanna and Simao, Bai in Dali, Naxi in Lijiang, Tibetan in Diqing, and each of them had a unique ethnic culture and utilized Puer tea in diverse ways. In these narratives, \textit{cha ma gu dao} proved the significant role of Yunnan in the tea trade and embodied its rich nature and culture (EBCMGD 2003).

For a long time Yunnan had been shadowed by the ill repute of drug smuggling, especially in reference to the areas bordering Burma. It had also been said to be a “backward” region with undeveloped production, transportation and economics. In jokes Yunnan was the place that people would go to only if they had been exiled by the emperor. Even the Yunnanese often mocked themselves saying that things of Yunnan

\textsuperscript{11}For the western academic accounts about the caravan routes between Yunnan and other southeast Asian regions, see Andrew Forbes (1987), Chiranlan Prasertkul (1989) and Ann Maxwell Hill (1998).
were *tu* (土), meaning earthy, rustic or backward. Or, they exclaimed that Yunnan did have excellent products such as tobacco, tea and tour resources, but Yunnanese were too simpleminded to package these products in eye-catching ways.

However today if I tell people from other provinces that I am from Yunnan, most of them would open their eyes, show an admiring expression, and say how they wished to visit Yunnan. Yunnanese, too, gradually realized the value of being “earthy.” Rather than being overwhelmed by an unexpected favor, they became more inclined to accept such admiration. This transformed image of Yunnan developed as a result of the interplay between Yunnan and the outside. It happened as China was accelerating its economic development. After getting used to urban development, consumers began to seek something more exotic and rural. In this process of changing taste, the “earthy” element became part of a new fashionable consumption trend (Hillman 2003). The masters of the earthy land began to actively develop their self presentation, often surpassing the expectation of the outside consumers. At the same time as Puer tea bloomed, Yunnan successfully presented a series of cultural activities, the so-called “*Yunnan Xianxiang*” (云南现象, Yunnan phenomenon) (Zhu Sikun and Li Yin 2006).

In 2003 there was a successful stage play *Yunnan Yingxiang* (云南映象, Dynamic Yunnan), with Yang Liping, the famous Yunnanese peacock dancer, in the starring role. It combined elements representing both the “primitive” ethnic folk of Yunnan and popular arts, and became a famous show as it toured all around China. *Yingxiang* (映象) literally means “impression,” and in Chinese its pronunciation is very similar to “influence” or “impact” (影响). Through this performance, Yunnan was making a dynamic impression on the national stage, as well as exerting its new impact (Figure 3.14 and 3.15).
In December 2001, the central government gave permission for Yunnan to rename one county in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture from Zhongdian to Shangri-La. Yunnan had successfully forestalled the intention of Sichuan and Tibet to use the same name. The term Shangri-La was initially used by James Hilton (1939) in his novel *Lost Horizon* to depict a mythical Tibetan paradise with a beautiful landscape and religious harmony. Its exact location has long been debated but it was imagined to be in southwestern China or the nearby Himalayas. Utilizing the results of some research and exploration, Yunnan announced in 1997 that Shangri-La was located in Yunnan and this was given formal approval in 2001. As a result, tourism to the prefecture and Yunnan in general boomed (Hillman 2003). Sichuan Province, another area that had hoped to claim Shangri-La, lagged one step behind Yunnan in achieving this validity (Figure 3.16 and 3.17).
At the same time, more and more film crews came to do work in Yunnan. They praised the province saying that it was a heaven for filmmaking.\textsuperscript{12} This was greatly welcomed and encouraged by the government of Yunnan. For example there were altogether ten fiction films made in Yunnan in 2006, and the government of Yunnan claimed that “the film industry is becoming one of the bright spots of Yunnan” (YRTN 2005) (Figure 3.18). Among these works there were some that were directly relevant to cha ma gu dao or Puer tea. In 2004, Delamu—Tea-Horse Road Series, a documentary by Tian Zhuangzhuang, a fifth-generation Chinese director, was shown in cinemas; in 2005, a TV series called Cha Ma Gu Dao was screened by China Central Television Station. Both of them made cha ma gu dao much more well known, and many tourists came to Yunnan as a result of these films.

Apart from new publishing, new plays, new tours and new films, Puer tea, the old commodity of the cha ma gu dao, became a newly fashionable drink representing Yunnan. On the one hand, the narratives about cha ma gu dao declared that Yunnan was the original place of tea and that it was the demand for and the transit of Puer tea that brought the cha ma gu dao into being (Mu Jihong 1992, 2004).\textsuperscript{13} On the other hand it was argued that the secret of Puer tea’s aged taste was accidentally discovered when natural fermentation, shaped by sunshine and rainfall, occurred along the hard and long caravan journey (Su Fanghua 2002: 50; Mu Jihong 2004: 92; Zhou Hongjie 2004: 8). With increasing awareness of the rising value of aged Puer tea in Hong Kong and Taiwan, going to Yunnan and traveling along cha ma gu dao became a fashionable tour in the early 2000s.

As a result of these influences, people never forgot to talk about how the life history of Puer tea was shaped by the caravan. In the same way that as people said that “Yiwu is full of culture” (chapter 1), they also said that “Puer tea has houzhong de wenhua (厚重的文化),” literally meaning a thick and heavy culture. This “heavy culture” metaphorically referred to all the hard journeys and the heavy loads carried by caravans in the past. Although caravans had inevitably been replaced by modern transportation, Puer tea was regarded as an important relic of the caravan. In many tea houses and tea exhibition places, there were displays of cow or horse bells and other old items used by

\textsuperscript{12} For films made in Yunnan, especially the fiction films since 1949, see Li Miao (2006).

\textsuperscript{13} This point is debated; according to other researchers there were also other important goods being carried, such as salt, cotton, opium, guns and other metal tools (see Prasertkul 1989; Hill 1998; Giersch 2006).
horse drivers. These artifacts were symbolic, reminding the consumers that the tea being consumed had a very important history (Figure 3.19).

Figure 3.18: Neon lights at a bus station in Kunming. The title says “New Films showing the ‘Yunnan Impact.’” The sub-title says “To experience a fantasy Yunnan via films.”

Figure 3.19: Exhibition of tea caravan artifacts at the 2006 Kunming tea trade fair.
At this time Yunnan was welcoming more visitors and was also promoting more caravan expeditions and associated activities. In addition to the two promotional caravans mentioned above, there was another organized in 2005, along the route towards Tibet, re-tracing the so-called classic cha ma gu dao (Yunnan Daily 2006a). Another expedition called “International Cultural Travel on cha ma gu dao” started from Xishuangbanna in October 2006. It was destined for Nepal, where a Yunnanese photographic exhibition was staged along with Puer tea serving performances (Xinjing Website 2006). In February 2006 an initiative was launched to store Puer tea on thirty-three famous mountains all around China (Wu Qiong 2006: 131). In July 2006 Puer tea was taken on board the Gothenburg—a rebuilt Swedish East India Company sailing vessel—in Guangzhou. It was said that this was to link cha ma gu dao, represented by Puer tea, and the Maritime Silk Road between Asia and Europe, represented by the Gothenburg (Yunnan Puer Cha 2006: 136-137; Yunnan Daily 2006b).

Since the early 1990s, the Yunnan Provincial government had designated three aims: to develop Yunnan towards “A Province with Powerful Green Economics,” “A Province with Rich Ethnic Culture” and “A Province with Rich Tour Culture.” Obviously, the Puer tea industry was very much in accordance with these aims. Being packaged with cha ma gu dao, Puer tea shaped Yunnan as an important channel connecting inland China with the wider world in both the past and the present. What’s more, Puer tea and cha ma gu dao were part of a bigger provincial promotion package that involved other factors such as new tours, new plays and new films. These multiple factors were closely linked and they influenced each other. Together they were used by the provincial government to supplant the old negative impression and rebuild a new healthy image for Yunnan.

“Great Values” Changing Consumption and Production

In the narratives on cha ma gu dao, Puer tea was endowed with the story that its aged taste was achieved after a long journey across a vast distance. In the process of re-definition, Puer tea’s origin was locked within the boundary of Yunnan, and it was

---

14 The Gothenburg was a sailing vessel of the Swedish East India Company built in the eighteenth century. The original one sank on 12 September 1745 while approaching its home harbor after returning from a trading journey to China. The goods exchanged were Swedish timber, tar, iron and copper in return for silver, tea, porcelain and silk. The wreck of the vessel was found in 1984 and the construction of the replica started in 1995. The rebuilt vessel sailed for China in October 2005 (Yunnan Daily 2006b).

15 In Chinese: 绿色经济强省，民族文化大省，旅游文化大省.
contended that only the large leaf tea material of Yunnan could produce authentic Puer tea, after a long period of storage.

These two narratives share a common emphasis: yue chen yue xiang (the longer the storage, the better the quality). This is said to be the distinguishing feature of Puer tea. From this leading feature, several key values of Puer tea were drawn out by traders, connoisseurs, consumers, researchers, mass media and government.

The first remarkable feature was Puer tea’s taste value. Since Puer tea’s prevalence, there had been a popular saying: once you love Puer tea, you would never drink other tea any more. I did not believe this until I met many people who had the same opinion and who were speaking from their own experiences. Many of them used to love Tieguaanying, a kind of oolong tea with an attractive aroma. They admitted that the taste of Puer was not so pleasant when they first encountered it, finding it either “too stimulating” (referring to raw Puer tea), “too earthy” or “moldy” (referring to artificially fermented Puer tea). But as they drank more they tended to appreciate the unique taste of Puer tea. The key word widely used to describe the ideal taste of raw Puer tea was huigan (回甘), a lingering sweetness and mellowness after a bitterness or astringency, which was said to be much better than that from Tieguaanying or other types of tea. The popular word for good artificially fermented Puer tea was nuan (暖, warm) or hua (滑, smooth). More key words came to be applied to aged raw Puer tea, as found in the book Puer Tea, the so called “Puer tea bible” by the Taiwanese tea expert Deng Shihai (2004). In this book, Deng (2004: 37-61) used many special terms to describe Puer tea’s “aged appeal” (chen yun, 陈韵): most extraordinary were those like wu wei zhi wei (无味之味, flavorless flavor), she di ming quan (舌底鸣泉, the bubbling-up of spring water from the bottom of the tongue), bu qi (补气, supplementing the vital breath), and also with a unique fragrance like that of orchid, camphor or lotus. These terms were later cited by a wide audience, and it was said that if one didn’t like Puer tea, that must be because one had not yet tasted good Puer tea with real aged appeal.

The second remarkable feature was Puer tea’s health value, something that almost every Puer tea drinker mentions. In interviews, several people used reports of their medical examinations to show the positive effect of Puer tea. That is, after drinking Puer tea for some time, they found that their high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or high blood sugar, was lowered. This has also been found in scientific experiments. Tea has long
been acknowledged to have multiple medicinal effects, and the experiments on Puer tea tried to show that it had notable effects on losing weight, improving digestion, warming up the stomach, reducing fever, lowering high blood pressure, and protecting against various diseases such as cancer, constipation, coronary disease and hardening of the arteries (Chi Zongxian 2005; Liu Qinjin 2005; Shi Kunmu 2005; Zhou Hongjie 2007). Besides this published scientific research, Puer tea’s health value was continuously discussed in tea houses. For instance, in Simao tea houses I was told that there was a local tea expert who was finding that Puer tea is helpful with HIV-AIDS. In other cases I’d heard that Puer tea was good for gout, altitude stress and so on. All sorts of information was available to convince consumers that consumption of Puer tea was helpful for having a longer life (Figure 3.20 and 3.21).

The third widely promoted feature of Puer tea was its cultural value. This was reflected in the provincial effort in authenticating Puer tea with cha ma gu dao. In addition, Puer tea was linked to broader levels of culture: its glorifying story of being used as tribute to the emperor was promoted; it was praised as the unique tea that still maintains the pressed shape of traditional Chinese tea dating from the Tang and Song Dynasties (seventh to thirteenth centuries); it was linked to Chinese traditional religion, and was praised as the best tea exemplifying the spirits of Daoism and Ch’an Buddhism because of its long time-bearing feature; it was used as metaphor for a person’s way of life in which one must take time to become mature and one should pursue a slow-paced and peaceful lifestyle to counteract the high speed of modernity. And I once heard from an informant from Beijing that those who drank Puer tea would be considered to have high suzhi (素質), that is, high personal quality. All this was embodied and summarized in a book called Tianxia Puer [Puer Tea All around the World] as:

It is uncertain when exactly its popularity began, but no doubt drinking Puer tea has become a sort of fashion. It identifies one’s superior status, and is related to vogue, collection and increase in value... Puer tea represents a certain life style, a certain culture, a kind of cultural brand (Li Yan and Yang Zejun 2004: prelude).

---

16 See more discussion of Suzhi in Andrew Kipnis (2006).
Figure 3.20: "Improving Beauty Puer Tea for Ladies" [Li Ren Puer] sold at the 2007 Guangzhou tea trade fair.

Figure 3.21: Puer tea paste sold at the 2007 Guangzhou tea trade fair. The text on the package quotes from an eighteenth century writer (Qing Dynasty) saying that Puer tea paste could help with sobering up after drinking alcohol, digesting food, eliminating phlegm and enriching saliva.
The fourth key feature of Puer tea was its wealth value. Puer tea has come to be praised as “a drinkable antique.” Many traders started to do more business in Puer tea rather than green tea or oolong tea. It was said that green tea or oolong tea would become nothing but trash if they were not sold in time, no matter how expensive they had originally been. Puer tea was the opposite: the older it was, the more expensive it became. The amazing prices of Puer tea at auction had become widely known (Figure 3.22). And there was a saying that spread widely: if you didn’t store Puer tea today, you would regret tomorrow. As a result more and more people have become engaged in buying and storing Puer tea.

**Figure 3.22: Puer Tea Auctions**

- In November 2002, at the Tea Evaluation of Guangzhou International Trade Fair, 100 grams of three-year-old Puer tea was auctioned for 168,000 RMB. This broke through the auction record for Tieguanying, 120,000 RMB in 2001.

- During the Chinese New Year in 2004, three grams of Puer tea stored in the Palace Museum and later collected by Lu Xun, a famous writer, were auctioned for 12,000 RMB. That is 4000 RMB per gram, 32 times the gold price at that time.

- In October 2005, after the new caravan from Simao reached Beijing, seven pieces of Puer tea (357 grams per piece) were auctioned for 1,600,000 RMB.

- In September 2006, at the first Yunnan International Tea Trade Fair, 100 grams of loose Puer tea was auctioned for 220,000 RMB.

- In May 2007, a piece of new Puer tea (about 400 grams) was auctioned for 400,000 RMB, which was so far the highest auction record for new Puer tea.

(CCTV 2 2008)
Many of these features of Puer tea were to do with long-lasting characteristic: its taste was appreciated because of its long lasting *huigan*, the lingering after-taste; it was considered healthy because it could help people achieve a longer life; it stood for high culture because it would last a long time; and it was helpful with wealth because its future price would be increased after long-term storage.

Because of all of the above, Puer tea became more and more popular. This changed the pattern of tea consumption and production in Yunnan as well as in some other tea areas of China. China has numerous kinds of tea, and each kind has tended to establish its proper niche according to consumer demands, natural conditions and food culture. Speaking from a regional perspective, jasmine tea is more popular in Beijing and northern China; eastern China, such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang (near Shanghai), has a long tradition of locally produced green tea, such as *Longjing*, one of the most famous green teas in China; and southeastern China, such as Fujian and part of Guangdong, consumes oolong tea with great passion. At a national level, green tea has long made up the largest part of tea consumption in China. And before Puer tea’s prevalence, it was oolong tea that was popular in some urban areas like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou amongst the middle and upper classes. But gradually Puer tea has changed this consumption pattern. According to various sayings Puer tea’s taste, health, wealth and culture value exceeded those of other kinds of tea. Since its revival in the mid 1990s, it took only a short time for Puer tea to become prominent in China. Its rapid increase in popularity in China was referred to as a “crazy Puer tea” (*fengkuang de Puer cha*, 疯狂的普洱茶) (*China Commercial Report* 2007).

In the Fangcun Tea Market in Guangzhou, the biggest distribution place for tea in China, more and more dealers turned to Puer tea. According to statistics compiled by the Guangdong Tea Culture Improvement Association, in 2006, 99 percent of the tea shops there were selling Puer tea and some who used to specialize in oolong tea also made Puer tea into an important sideline. The total of tea transactions in that year amounted to 67 billion RMB, with Puer tea making up one third of the total (*Puer Tea Weekly* 2007d).

Puer tea was not new to Guangdong, where people were accustomed to drinking it with *yum cha* like in Hong Kong. However, in northern China, the new caravans made Puer tea into a new fashion virtually overnight. A tea trader from Beijing, whom I met in
Yiwu, recalled the scene in 2005 when the first caravan arrived in Maliandao, the biggest tea market in Beijing and all of northern China:

All the people in Maliandao were startled by the arrival of such a fantastic caravan, which they had only ever read about in books or seen in pictures. And what shocked them most was that a piece of Puer tea carried by the caravan could be auctioned at such a surprising price. Since then, the tea sellers in the markets began Puer tea business without exception.

The culture show of the modern caravan did have an impact by presenting an attractive image of Puer tea and its hometown Yunnan. In a speech by one of Simao’s leaders, the caravan to Beijing and the welcoming of the Golden Melon tea “back home” were linked as a matched pair. And in the foreword of the special issue of *Pu-Erh* produced for Simao’s name change, “back home” had several metaphoric meanings: on one level, the Golden Melon’s return “back home,” made it reasonable in terms of “respecting history” for Simao to change its name “back” to Puer. On another level, it attributed the boom of Puer tea to the desirability of returning back to an appropriate lifestyle:

Puer tea calls us back to health…it is proven to be beneficial for our health, physically and psychologically…drinking Puer tea is consistent with this healthy tide; Puer tea calls us back to good life. After our stomach is full, our tongue needs more enjoyment from drinking tea … the good taste of Puer tea lets us enjoy wonderful spiritual moments … Puer tea calls us back to culture collection. As time passes, you are waiting for the tea’s value to be increased, as well as waiting for your own life to become more mellow (*Pu-Erh Special Issue* 2007a: 5).

Being linked to home, Puer tea was identified with some people’s ideal lifestyle, as well as with Yunnan’s provincial image. Jiao Jiaju, the manager of *Long Run*, one of the biggest Puer tea companies of Yunnan, called for “recovering the name card of Yunnan that was lost in an alien land” (Ma Yihua 2006). To him, the “alien land” referred to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Guangdong and areas in Southeast Asia where people appreciated Puer tea much more than the Yunnanese. To him, Yunnan had always been producing good tea and serving it for these alien lands, but Yunnanese themselves didn’t seriously drink it and didn’t actually understand this tea at all! He proposed a counter-question: “shouldn’t Puer tea be a name card for Yunnan? This name card has been lost by
Yunnan and left in alien lands. Now the others come to us, bringing the aged models with them. We’ll have to work hard to print out more of our name cards.”

Jiao Jiaju’s appeal actually reflected the fact that Yunnan was working hard to “print out” more Puer tea. The 2006 government definition included both raw and artificially fermented tea as Puer tea, despite the continuous debate on which one was more authentic. Once the newly produced raw Puer tea was included in the definition, the output of Puer tea increased.\(^1\) *China Newsweek* (Tang Jianguang, Zou Li, and Wang Xun 2007b) cited Zou Jiaju, saying that according to the 2003 definition, which only included artificially fermented tea, the output of Yunnan’s Puer tea since the 1970s had been only one to two thousand tons per year; but according to the 2006 definition that included both raw and artificially fermented tea, the total output of Puer tea suddenly reached 80 thousand tons per year.

While the fortunes of Puer tea rose, the fortunes of other kinds of tea declined, in both consumption and production. There was a large tea trade fair in Simao when it was renamed as “Puer” in early April 2007. It was around *qingming* (清明), one of the twenty-four fortnightly periods in the Chinese lunar-solar calendar, a good time for trading green tea. Green tea is valued for its freshness, and the green tea that is harvested and processed before *qingming* is regarded as the best in the year. I like green tea. I knew Simao was good at producing several kinds of green tea and I hoped that I could find some among the 230 dealers that make up the trade fair. To my disappointment I could not find any sign of green tea. Everywhere, in all the tea stores, in the prolific tea propagandas advertising material, in ethnic performances, in luxurious tea packs, there was only Puer tea in pressed form (Figure 3.23 and 3.24). Suddenly I noticed a familiar name: *da bai cha* (大白茶, large white tea), a type of loose green tea produced in Jinggu in Simao, made from thick tea buds. I once drank it at a tea house in Kunming. Infused in a glass, the thick tea buds floated on the top of the water. It was good to look at as well as to drink. The *da bai cha* at the tea trade fair, however, was pressed into a round cake. And I was told that it was Puer tea made of *da bai cha*. The appearance of the caked tea was attractive, covered with beautiful buds. But I thought that it may only look beautiful as a cake, while later it would be difficult to have the complete buds floating in the tea brew, because the pressed cake needs to be broken into

---

\(^1\) Raw Puer tea isn’t like the artificially fermented Puer tea that needs more artificial and technical work, neither has it been naturally fermented as long as aged Puer tea, and therefore could be produced more quickly.
smaller pieces for brewing. I said to myself that maybe this was still green tea but that it was now shaped in the form of a cake (Figure 3.25). But I was told by the sellers that they didn’t have green tea because it couldn’t be stored for very long. They said green tea was not as good as Puer tea that could bear long-term storage.

**Figure 3.23**: Pressed Puer tea sold at the 2007 Simao tea trade fair.
Figure 3.24: Decorative Puer tea sold at the 2007 Simao tea trade fair. The melon-shaped Puer tea has nine layers, symbolizing good luck and superior status; the round cake Puer tea has animal sculptures on the surface, representing the twelve symbolic animals of the birth years in the Chinese lunar calendar.

Figure 3.25: Pressed da bai cha made of tea buds.
Not only in Simao, but also in Kunming there were similar cases. It seemed that, if possible, every bit of tea material in Yunnan was being used for making Puer tea. I knew that there were many debates about Puer tea and green tea, and some said that raw Puer tea was actually green tea. But at least in a formal sense, green tea had disappeared around qingming, which used to be its preferred time.

According to a speech in July 2007 by the Vice-governor of Yunnan Province, the output of Puer tea in Yunnan in 2006 reached 80 thousand tons, 28 thousand tons more than the previous year. Over the same period the proportion of Puer tea, as a proportion of all Yunnanese tea, increased from 45 percent to 58 percent (Kong Chuizhu 2007).

**Conclusion: Multiply Imagined Home**

This chapter has shown how Puer tea was packaged with added value. It was to be a key industry representing various geographical origins. The main promoter was the government of Yunnan, “the biggest booster of Puer tea” as noted by the media (Tang Jianguang, Zou Li, and Wang Xun 2007b: 30). Puer tea’s home is trans-regionally authenticated and multiply imagined. Again, this embodies what I call the jianghu of Puer tea, in which contested desires meet, debate and negotiate. It also develops some of the issues raised in Spring, to explain from a broader view how the packaging of Puer tea has been shaped by ongoing geopolitics.

Scholars in anthropology and political economy have provided similar cases in Europe about the state’s participation in promoting profiles of commodities by linking them to locality. This is most clearly exemplified in the cases of wine (Guy 2003; Ulin 1996), and cheese (Grasseni 2003) in France. Similar approaches were evident in other European countries like Italy in relation to “slow food” (Leitch 2003). In the early nineteenth century, the French invented the concept of “terroir,” which was supported by, and clarified within, government regulations. “Terroir” stressed that wine or cheese derives certain characteristics from a certain unique local nature, such as soil and temperature, and also unique local production techniques. This “terroir” is un-replicable. Furthermore, this concept was also linked to the unique French cultures that shape the characteristic of the product as well as the inhabitants in the production areas (Barham 2003; Grasseni 2003; Phillips 2006). This emphasis on locality again echoes Walter Benjamin’s (1969) idea about authenticity: things that are authentic should contain the aura of originality. In the case of Puer tea, the state, namely the government of Yunnan,
also participated in this movement of linking and emphasizing locality and originality. By updating the definition and production guidelines about Puer tea several times, they tried to identify Puer tea with Yunnan in order to attack non-Yunnanese “fake” Puer tea.

David Harvey has proposed an insightful perspective on looking at capitalism in the postmodern era. To him, under globalization, time and space is compressed, and the boundaries between spaces become vague. But he points out that “the less important the spatial barriers, the greater the sensitivity of capital to the variations of place within space, and the greater the incentive for places to be differentiated in ways attractive to capital” (Harvey 1989: 295-296). That is, while all the places are seemingly sharing a common global home, each one actively seeks to present a distinct intrinsic self in order to attract investment, commerce and tourism. In the case of Puer tea, in the process of constructing such a distinction, various forms of knowledge, whether historical or botanical or whatever, were “flexibly accumulated,” to use Harvey’s term (1989: 295), to authenticate one’s unique identification with Puer tea. And compared with the European cases of wine or cheese, the uniqueness of Puer tea lies in the great complexity of forces and the high degree of flexibility in accumulating cultural and economic capital in the ongoing consumption revolution of reform China.

Similarly, Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein (Oakes and Schein 2006) examine “translocality” to understand the ongoing mobility and interaction among different places in the reform era of China. According to them, in this “translocality,” the role of each locality is not weakened at all, rather there is “a revitalization of place making and place differentiation,” and the identity construction of place crosses various geographical levels and “multiple scales” (Oakes and Schein 2006: 2). In the case of Puer tea, the construction of the identity of place is displayed by the competition between different administrative units about which is the authentic home of Puer tea. An important strategy of scale is used in these constructions and competitions: while Simao (or Xishuangbannan) declared itself to be the very origin of Puer tea, it admitted that Yunnan was the general home of Puer tea. Similarly, while Yunnan used Puer tea as a provincial representation, it also stressed that Puer tea embodies the essence of Chinese tea culture. In this strategy, the lower scale becomes the representative of the higher scale. It echoes what Oakes and Schein (2006: 7) call “ideologies of translocalism,” in which the identification of the local is imaginatively consistent with
that of the nation and also of the global, and the economy of the local is practically supported so that it can reach the global standard.

Following the ideas of Harvey and Oakes and Schein, it is clear that as more voices have tried to set a clear boundary for Puer tea, the more complicated and vague its image has come to be. Such complexity and vagueness, in turn, aroused people’s desire to further demystify, re-authenticate and re-imagine Puer tea and its home. But no one would tolerate the other’s discipline when they competed in this jianghu of Puer tea. It is these multiple desires that together have heated up Puer tea’s extraordinary value, but they have also resulted in the impossibility of defining a singular home for Puer tea. This home can only be multiply imagined.
Chapter 4 Heating Up and Cooling Down

Chinese tea culture has long been cultivated by the Chinese aspiration for moderation and harmony...As Fei Wen in the Tang Dynasty [in his Cha Shu (Chen Zugui and Zhu Zizhen 1981: 18)] has described: “tea has refined and pure characteristics; it tastes great and clean; it can help with removing worries; it will result in harmoniousness” (Zhang Zhongliang and Mao Xianjie 2006: 273).

Tea Frying and Tea Speculation

Staying in Yiwu, since early April 2007, I received many requests from friends in Kunming, asking me to find and purchase some good Puer tea for them. I was happy because more friends were developing an interest in Puer tea, but at the same time I also felt uneasy and took this as a difficult task since one person’s food might be another’s poison. This uneasiness became even stronger when I received a call from a close relative who rarely drank tea. He asked me to buy some Puer tea in Yiwu that would increase in value in the future. But there were over 50 family brands in Yiwu. It was very hard for me to predict which one would definitely have a higher value in the future. Several days later he called me again saying that he only needed me to buy a few samples of tea from Yiwu. Another friend in Menghai had collected some famous and expensive types for him, such as Dayi (大益), the brand of the Menghai Tea Factory, and Zhongcha (中茶), the brand of the Chinese Tea Company in Yunnan (Figure 4.1 and 4.2).

Later in Kunming I saw the valuable tea that his friend had bought. They were Dayi 7542, the so called representative product of raw Puer tea; Dayi 7572, the representative of artificially fermented Puer tea;¹ and several pieces of Zhongcha, packaged with old paper and declared to be aged. Altogether they cost him around 10,000 RMB, and it seemed that he was keen to obtain more if possible. My relative was very busy, and I wondered how he could have the spare time to think about Puer tea. He told me that the tea was not for drinking but for a good investment for the future.

¹ “75” refers to the tea prescription initially applied in 1975; “7” or “4” refers to the grade of the basic tea material; “2” stands for the Menghai Tea Factory. 7572 is artificially fermented Puer, and 7542 is (naturally fermented) raw Puer. Both of them are products of the Menghai Tea Factory.
Figure 4.1: Dayi product. The character in the center of the tea cake is yi (益), literally meaning benefit or increase.

Figure 4.2: Zhongcha product. The character in the center is 茶 (tea), surrounded by eight 中 (China).
Meanwhile it became obvious that many people were developing a great passion for Puer tea. One day I was invited by an old friend for lunch in Kunming, where I was surprised to see many Dayi 7542 stored in the study of her house. This Puer tea, I was told, were purchased by her younger brother as a sideline investment and stored there temporarily. From my mother, I learnt that several of her old colleagues, who used to work in the engineering field, were beginning to run tea shops in Kunming. Near my parents’ house there used to be a grocery store in a crowded street. Overnight it was transformed into a Puer tea shop. It seemed that Puer tea was breaking the old Chinese custom that a tea shop should be located in a quiet place. Even in the vegetable market near my house I saw an old woman selling caked Puer tea with a moving stall, which looked extraordinary (Figure 4.3). A local magazine said that there were three times as many Puer tea shops in China in 2006 as in 2005 (*Puer Jianghu* 2007a: 15). Even more opened in 2007 (Figure 4.4).

When the price of Puer tea increased greatly in the spring of 2007, local people in production areas like Yiwu fried tea leaves diligently and often worked until late at night. In Simao and Jinghong I joined in some occasional tea meetings in local tea shops, where regular customers from various occupations gathered, learning tasting techniques and acquiring the newest information on Puer tea. As a Jinghong journalist commented, it was the moment of *quán mín jié chá* (全民皆茶), entire nation engaged in tea.²

Many things showed that people were speculating on Puer tea, just like speculating on stocks in financial markets. In some Kunming tea houses, I saw many people drinking and talking about Puer tea around a tea table while checking interest rates and share prices with a laptop. Among this group there was usually a tea expert, who instructed the group members on how to properly collect, infuse and drink Puer tea. There was also often a stock expert, who instructed them on how to follow the ups and downs of the stock market. These tea shop groups were made up of people who both *chāo chá* (炒茶), speculate on Puer tea and also *chāo gǔ* (炒股), speculate on the stock market.

---

² This is developed from the popular slogan *quán mín jié bǐng* (全民皆兵), entire nation in arms.
Figure 4.3: Selling Puer tea in a Kunming vegetable market.

Figure 4.4: A Puer tea shop opened in Kunming in early 2007 by a big tea company. The window on the left sells quickly infused Puer tea, very like Starbucks’ take-away. The shop on the right with the round door sells various Puer tea products.
In Guangzhou, during March and April 2007, the price of Puer tea was increasing very rapidly once it had changed hands in the Fangcun Tea Market. It was said that half the store of Puer tea in China was in Guangdong, and Fangcun was the biggest national wholesale tea market. Most Puer tea there was traded by the *jian* (件). One *jian* contains twelve stacks, one stack contains seven pieces, and one piece of Puer tea usually weighs 375 grams. So one *jian* has eighty-four pieces of caked Puer tea, weighing a total of 31.5 kilograms. Before I went to Fangcun, I heard of a saying: “if you ask how much one piece of Puer tea is, no one will pay attention to you; but if you ask how much one *jian* is, the seller will put a chair in front of you and ask for a detailed consultation.” This showed that Puer tea was being sold as a bulk commodity, and also as a product for exchange or storage rather than for immediate consumption. A local trader described the crazy rising of Puer tea prices in Fangcun at that time:

The price of some Puer tea can be totally different in the one day. For example it is 5000 RMB in the morning, but soon turns to be 5200 RMB in the afternoon. Sometimes it can increase 500 RMB in several hours. Not all kinds of tea can be speculated on like this, only Puer tea, as it has the “long-lasting” characteristic.

Before this it had been popularly said that “if you didn’t buy Puer tea when you were young, you will regret it when you become old.” During the speculation craze, the saying changed to become “if you didn’t buy one *jian* of Puer tea today, you will regret it tomorrow.” When my friends learnt that I was doing research on Puer tea, many commented meaningfully that I was making a good choice, and in their hinted suggestions I could gain great advantage by joining in *chao cha*, like many other people in Kunming, Yunnan, Guangdong and throughout China.

The original meaning of *chao cha* (炒茶) is stir-frying tea with fire, often in a very large wok, a standard part of tea’s rough production. In addition to sunning, steaming and baking, stir-frying tea leaves, *chao* (炒), is seen as one important way to boost the aroma of tea. It is a technique which is said to have become popular in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

---

3 Eating tea leaves could be an initial way of utilizing tea, and actually this consumption habit still remains among some ethnic groups of Yunnan such as Jinmo and Hani, and also across the border in Burma. In long time history the Chinese have also invented various ways of controlling the fermentation degree of tea leaves, known as fixation (*sha qing*, 杀青) (Cai 2006), in order to get different flavors of tea and also make them more preservable (Chen 1984: 189).
Different degrees of stir-frying are applied to different kinds of tea, according to different fermentation processes. Green tea is non-fermented, and its stir-frying must deactivate all the enzymes to ensure that fermentation will not take place. Oolong tea is partially fermented, and when its fermentation reaches around 50 percent, stir-frying is used to stop any further fermentation. Puer tea is produced with post-fermentation: its stir-frying pauses the activities of enzymes temporarily but leaves the possibility for post-fermentation in a subsequent procedure. The temperature for frying Puer tea, therefore, should not be so high that it kills all the enzymes, nor should it be so low that the fermentation is not temporarily halted. In Yiwu, I observed that the temperature of tea frying is an important issue for both tea peasants and tea traders. The correct temperature is determined by personal experience rather than actual measurement.

When people mentioned *chao cha* to me, they were using it in an extended and metaphorical sense. Here, *chao* (炒, stir-frying) is to deliberately heat and elevate the profile of something. *Chao cha*, in this context, means that Puer tea was a subject of speculation, exactly like the stock market. Not all kinds of tea could be subject to this sort of speculation, but because Puer tea is said to be a “drinkable antique,” it could be purchased, exchanged and stored in the hope that it would increase in value.

Lévi-Strauss’s conceptual distinction between “the raw” and “the cooked” could be borrowed to interpret the transformation of Puer tea. According to him, via cooking, nature is transformed and culture is defined. This is similar to the ideas of maturation and socialization in Chinese and Confucian concepts that refer to processes of acculturation and education. In the classical “culinary triangle,” Lévi-Strauss (1970, 2008) compares three different ways of cooking: roasting, boiling and smoking, any of which could be more natural or cultural than the others depending upon different cooking methods or different cooking results (see also Leach 1970). In the case of Puer tea, the primary processing method is not roasting, boiling or smoking, but frying, which Lévi-Strauss mentions less, but it does coincide with his general argument that through frying Puer tea is transformed from the natural tea leaves into a cultural drink.

So, on the one hand, Puer tea is fried technically and physically, reaching a balance that is good for drinking as well as for post-fermentation. On the other hand, it is fried metaphorically, in particular heated up towards humanly-endowed values: taste value, health value, cultural value and wealth value. When people mention *chao cha* on the
latter level, it refers to any symbolic behavior, propaganda, or even the stock-like speculation that elevated the value of Puer tea.

Both senses of frying demonstrate Lévi-Strauss’ theory in a particular way: the more artificial interference, the further the tea is away from its original natural features, though I have also shown in previous chapters that nature has never been kept away but has remained an essential component in shaping its superior culture. Following on from the story of its being heated up, this chapter will tell the story of how Puer tea met trouble in the summer of 2007 when the price fell and its values were questioned. Again various voices emerged, attempting to find out the basic reason for Puer tea’s downfall. One notable point of view attributed Puer tea’s fall to excessive artificial interference; using the metaphor again, the temperature of stir-frying had become too high. Puer tea became over-cooked and therefore became problematic.

Lévi-Strauss’s binary concept enlightens me on structuring the packaging of Puer tea from its rise to its fall, and this binary also helps with re-thinking all sorts of oppositional reflections about Puer tea. In addition, by contrasting Puer tea’s being heating up and cooling down, I want to explore the interplay between multiple human actors, their divergence and interaction in authenticating Puer tea, their concerns with moderation, criticism, and clarifying and obscuring the facts about the tea. It is these cultural concerns and the tension between each of them, I argue, that had pre-determined the fate of Puer tea from its rise to its fall. And in this regard, I contend that the downfall of Puer tea cannot simply be understood from an economic perspective—which mainly attributed the recession to speculation, greediness and failure to obey basic economic rules—but has to be understood in terms of the public debate about cultural values.

**Two Earthquakes**

An earthquake of 6.4 on the Richter scale occurred in Simao (sub-district) on 3 June 2007. The epicenter was in Puer town, which had been renamed as Ninger just two months earlier. Three people were killed, 562 people were injured; and over a million people suffered property damage in Puer. The direct economic loss was 25 billion RMB (CCTV 2007). Besides the casualties, people were very concerned about the impact on Puer tea production. One economic analyst, Xia Tao, expressed this concern when he later participated in a television discussion: “the price of Puer tea had kept on increasing
all through the spring. Theoretically it should have jumped up higher due to the production loss caused by the earthquake. However, the price didn’t rise soon after the earthquake. Then I said to myself that something wrong must be happening” (Dialogue 2008).

An economic report on Puer tea by China Central Television Station 2 was screened on 15 June 2007 (Economy 30’ 2007). This report was taken as the turning point after which Puer tea’s profile suddenly decreased—though the reduction in price had actually begun earlier—and it became a specific target that Puer tea supporters later challenged. The report stated that two earthquakes were affecting Puer tea: the earthquake in Puer city (renamed from Simao), the production area of Puer tea; and the earthquake affecting Puer tea’s price in the marketplace. Titled “The Bubble of Puer tea is Broken,” the thirty-minute program started its report from the Fangcun Tea Market in Guangzhou, the biggest tea-distributing center in China, whose Puer tea price was acknowledged to be the barometer for all the tea markets in China. The report said that the price of Puer tea there had fallen by half in the previous 30 days. For instance, one jian of 7572 Puer tea (31.5 kilograms) was sold at 20,000 RMB a month ago but now its price was only 9000 RMB and, according to the report, its factory price was only about 5000 RMB. Drawing a comparison with speculation on the stock market, the report described the large tea factories and companies, along with their distributors as the invisible hands “shuffling the tiles.” It gave an example to show how, in the past few months, Puer tea’s value had been deliberately elevated:

Let’s take 30 kilograms of Puer tea as an example. Its factory price is 4800 RMB; the first level of distributor, who acquires the dealership at a very high cost, sells only 20 percent of his stock, which causes misguided information that this product is scarce in the market. The dealer then repurchases the tea at a higher price to elevate the value; and then sells all of his stock at this higher price. After this speculation is repeated by the second and the third level distributors, the price of this Puer tea reaches 23,000 RMB. The private investors, who buy it at this stage, have been deeply caught up in the market and it is hard for them to get away.

According to the report, the rising price of the basic tea material in the production area was also spurred by the deliberate elevation in urban markets. And when the most
powerful “bankers”\footnote{Here “bankers” refers to those powerful Puer tea investors, including some big tea companies.} suddenly withdrew, the private investors and middlemen could do nothing but cry.

The report included several amazing figures:

1. The fee that the distributors must pay to the big tea factories/companies for distribution rights ranged from 1,000,000 RMB to 30,000,000 RMB. The more they paid, the larger the amount of Puer tea that they could order. In the report, this point was considered to be the key reason that Puer tea’s price had become so extraordinarily high, since all the distributors must find ways to recover their initial investment.

2. The report said that dealers have between 100 and 300 tons of Puer tea in stock that they could not resell since the price had collapsed.

3. It said that 95 percent of tea products were used for speculation and storage, with only five percent for actual consumption. Citing the words of one tea expert in Guangdong, the report said that “even without buying another piece of Puer tea from the production area, Guangdong could not drink all of its storage for between five and eight years.”

The report drew the conclusion that Puer tea's rise and fall was due to improper speculation. It asked ordinary investors a rhetorical question: “For a certain commodity, if the quantity in storage is far more than its actual consumption, would it be valued so high?” The report had great repercussions due to its national broadcasting impact. It became the hottest topic for discussion among people who cared about the Puer tea business.

Another influential media report was in a magazine called Xinshengdai [New Generations], published by the Sichuan Youth Newspaper. It said that the total population of China involved in chao cha, Puer tea speculation, had reached 30 million. It argued that this large population had been tiao xi (调戏), played a trick on, by the complicity of bankers, illegal traders, large tea companies and government officials (Guo Yukuan 2007a).
Also examining Puer tea’s popularity as a focus of stock-market-like speculation, the article used a case study of the problematic business model of Zhongcha, the brand of the Chinese Tea Company in Yunnan. In this problematic model, the Zhongcha Company authorized private companies to “produce” Puer tea that was specially packaged as Zhongcha. What these private processors sold was actually the marked package rather than the authentic technique and quality of Zhongcha Puer tea. As a result, fake Puer tea flooded into the markets (Guo Yukuan 2007a). Just like my relative who had asked me to collect Puer tea for him, many investors had spent their money on brands like Zhongcha seemingly produced by famous Puer tea companies. The popular wisdom told them that these brands would have the potential to increase in value. The report by Xinshendai, and the actual downturn in the tea market, nevertheless, swayed their faith in the authenticity of these products. The tea that my relative bought was, as far as I knew, still kept untouched. They were just small cases. There were more reports about a more serious crisis among larger distributors. These reports made it clear that Puer tea could be a devil as well as an angel.

Media reports on Puer tea had flourished since the Puer tea trade bloomed. Up until 2007 there had been thirteen Puer tea magazines, ten of them from Yunnan. Most of them were established between 2005 and 2007, in print, television or web form. There were also special columns in newspapers (Yunnan Puer Cha 2007). Before Puer tea’s downfall these media reports, especially those from Yunnan, had always carried “good news” about Puer tea, celebrating its great values and reporting great events like the name change of Simao and the new tea caravans. By contrast, national media, like CCTV 2, and media from other provinces, like Xinchengdai became the pioneers that spread “bad news” about Puer tea. Puer tea suddenly became seriously ill, and for the first time some of its “brilliant aspects” were said to be nothing or perhaps even negative factors. For instance, the production process of Puer tea, which was described as delicate and labour-intensive in many past publications, was now reported to be “not complex and mysterious at all” (Economy 30' 2007); the medicinal function of Puer tea, which was very positively publicized before, now was pointed out to be “almost the same as other sorts of tea” (Economy 30' 2007). One report said that “the special function of Puer tea still waits to be further proved,” and that “it’s misguided propaganda that Puer tea has a long-lasting feature” (Wang Xun 2007; Xiaocui’s Talk 2007).
I attended a symposium at the end of June 2007 in Kunming, two weeks after the show about Puer tea’s recession had been broadcast. It was initiated by the Puer Tea Association of Yunnan and was attended by state government officials, local media, principals of several big tea companies, tea experts, and some self-invited tea traders. Most of them were from Yunnan, though a few guests were invited from Beijing. A banner displayed the title of the conference: “The Voices from Yunnan—the Clarification of Puer tea’s Current Situation” (Figure 4.5). I felt that the atmosphere was very serious. First of all, the report by CCTV 2 was screened. This screening, together with the following statements, demonstrated the hostility of the symposium sponsor towards the central media report. It said informally that the report by CCTV 2 was the result of bribery by some groups who were hostile to Yunnan’s Puer tea and that the symposium was a counterattack. The Puer Tea Weekly, a Puer tea media outlet supported by the Puer Tea Association of Yunnan, declared the purpose of the symposium to be:

Puer tea has encountered fluctuation recently and its sales are at a temporary standstill. Some false reports together with spiteful rumors have seriously harmed this newly emerged industry. Under such a situation this symposium was organized (Puer Tea Weekly 2007a).

![Figure 4.5: The “Voices from Yunnan” symposium held in Kunming.](image)

Obviously “false reports” referred to the claims by media outlets such as CCTV 2 and Xinshengdai. For example, some attendants at the symposium expressed their anger that
the key feature of Puer tea, *yue chen yue xiang* (the longer storage, the better taste), was being weakened by those reports, and the medicinal function of Puer tea was said to be just the same as other kinds of tea. In one speaker’s statement, these “negative” reports might have been deliberately plotted by groups of people whose interests had been harmed by Puer tea’s popularity. An article published in the *Evening Newspaper of Kunming* echoed this idea, and the author recalled some events in which Puer tea had been deliberately attacked on several occasions. For instance, in 2004 a certain newspaper had said that not all Puer tea was worthwhile storing; in 2005 Guangdong media “created” a story that some Puer tea was fermented in a pigsty; and in 2006 it was reported that twelve kinds of Puer tea produced in Yunnan were not quality products. After giving these examples, the article concluded that it had been a common phenomenon for Puer tea to be attacked by false or exaggerated reports. The falling price in 2007 actually only affected some brands, such as *Dayi* and *Zhongcha*, but in media reports it had been described in exaggerated terms as the collapse of the entire Puer tea market (Lu Ming 2007).

At the end of the symposium, even though there were some differing opinions, a manifesto was composed, calling for the “protection of Puer tea” and “defending it against any harm.” The manifesto also stressed that Yunnan was the original home of tea, and that Puer tea had to be made from Yunnan’s large-leaf tea variety.

Soon after the symposium, in July 2007, the Tea Association of Yunnan launched the Puer tea geographical trademark. The production or trade unit could put the trademark on their tea products only after they were certified and had paid certain fees. The function of the trademark was to assure the authenticity of Yunnan’s Puer tea (*Puer Tea Weekly* 2007b). But it was not a compulsory regulation, and only a small number of traders registered to use it.

In the following months, the Tea Association of Yunnan and some allied tea units organized a series of activities. For example, mass media from Beijing were invited to Yunnan to report about the “truth” of Puer tea. At the same time a panel from Yunnan went to Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai, participating in local tea festivals or trade fairs to

---

5 The fees are not specified clearly in the formal notification. From some traders I learnt that for each Puer tea cake (357 or 400 grams) the geographical mark cost 0.09 RMB (members) or 0.13 RMB (non-members).

6 I heard from many tea traders that this didn’t really assure the authentic quality, but was just a new way for the local government to collect more charges.
publicize Puer tea’s positive image (*Puer Tea Weekly* 2007c). In November more government-organized panels along with private tea companies and traders were encouraged to participate in the Tea Trade Fair in Guangzhou, the most important annual tea fair in China. Several of my informants who had attended this trade fair told me, when they returned, that other kinds of tea, like oolong tea from Fujian and dark tea from Guangxi, were being promoted at the trade fair as being suitable for long-term storage. As one person said, “These people of other provinces criticized us, saying that we can’t say that Puer tea could be stored for ages, but in fact they themselves were utilizing this long-lasting feature.”

When the long-lasting merit of Puer tea came to be doubted during the downturn, a new concept on consuming Puer tea was advocated widely in Yunnan. A female trader in Jinghong told me that it was the right time to encourage people to really drink rather than just store Puer tea, or its value could not be fulfilled. Some young and raw Puer tea, she said, actually tasted better before they became aged. Obviously this new idea promoting immediate consumption was attempting to address the claim on CCTV 2 that “even without buying another piece of Puer tea from the production area, Guangdong could not drink all of its storage for between five and eight years.”

I understood that she was very worried about all the Puer tea piled up in her tea shop. Since May 2007 fewer and fewer customers had visited her tea shop, in contrast to the very busy scene in March when I first met her. The tea price shown on her sales counter had been reduced. But she, and other “protectors” of Puer tea, said that this reduction was just “back to normal,” which meant that the previous high rise was abnormal and the current so-called recession was not a real recession after all. The market was just settling back to its reasonable level.

Previously, Puer tea had been heated up as a national business and celebrated for its great values. When the market was challenged and the suspicions emerged, the voices from Yunnan rose up to counter the criticisms, and endeavored to continue the celebrations, or at least to make the crisis seem more like a minor incident. Moreover, the various “protection” events launched by the government of Yunnan also promoted the opinion that Puer tea could only be truly represented by Yunnan rather than by anywhere else. Intrinsically, this was an attempt to singularize Puer tea’s identity, in the same way that the government had previously tried to define Puer tea: it could only be
made from large-leaf tea material from Yunnan rather than tea material from anywhere else.

**Over Cooked or Too Raw?**

Although the provincial government had developed a series of events to “protect” Puer tea, criticism continued, formally and informally, attempting to reflect upon the root cause of the recession. I want to enumerate more of these voices to illustrate the multiple public opinions that were circulating, and to further illustrate the cultural characteristics that shaped the rise and fall of Puer tea.

Generally there were two main opinions. On the one hand, it was said that Puer tea’s downfall was due to too many things being done; metaphorically, Puer tea was overcooked. On the other hand, an alternative point of view attributed Puer tea’s crisis to a lack of proper effort; metaphorically, Puer tea hadn’t been cooked enough and was still too raw.

For those making the “overcooked” argument, the government, whether at the provincial or district level, was the number one culprit being blamed. Since 1993 there had been over ten conferences on Puer tea (some attached to trade fairs) inside or outside of Yunnan, all sponsored by local authorities (Figure 4.6). In April 2007 there were three in rapid succession, separately organized by the district governments of Simao, Xishuangbanna and Lincang. The “welcoming” of the Golden Melon, Simao’s name change, several caravan expeditions, linking Puer tea to the Gothenburg, various celebrity performances, the auction of aged Puer tea, and even the elevation of tea price, were all criticized as being deliberate over-packaging of Puer tea by the government. For instance, the 2005 caravan from Puer successfully finished the trip, and the Puer tea it carried was auctioned at an amazing price in Beijing. But the other caravan, starting from Yiwu in 2006, was considered to have been a failure and an ill-planned repetition. Most people in Yiwu who had contributed Puer tea to this caravan were unhappy, because nobody told them where their products had ended up. In fact, due to a shortage of funds this caravan had to pause in Zhejiang province (near Shanghai) before heading towards Beijing. While they were looking for further funds to continue the trip, their horses were stolen and they had to sell the remaining Puer tea to cover their transport costs home. As Huang Bingsheng, the vice-head of the Standing Committee of Yunnan Provincial People’s Congress, commented “good things can’t surpass three times”
(haoshi bu guo san, 好事不过三). His words reflected a view that success could not be guaranteed especially when it was just based on imitation (Dialogue 2008).

**Figure 4.6:** Puer Tea Symposia (1993 to 2007)

- 2005. 1780 Year of the Commemoration of Kongming’s Boosting Tea and Yunnan Puer Tea International Academic Forum, Xishuangbanna.
- 2006. The 1st Lincang Tea Culture Exhibition, Lincang.

The mass media was also criticized. According to one representative at the “Voices from Yunnan” symposium, exaggerated propaganda by various mass media outlets had really been very detrimental for Puer tea. For instance, he thought it was improper to publicize forest tea’s superiority over terrace tea, or to exaggerate Puer tea’s medicinal function. To him, the Puer tea price would have gone down if it had not been promoted by the media as a stock for speculation.

When the “stock market value” of Puer tea was discussed at the symposium, I suddenly realized that the meeting room, situated in a wholesale tea market in Kunming, was actually the place where electronic transactions for Puer tea were undertaken. The

---

7 For detailed description about forest tea and terrace tea, see chapter 2 and chapter 5.
screen, which showed the CCTV 2 report that day, was normally used to show the latest information about Puer tea, such as the most recent price of a certain Puer tea product. It functioned just like the electronic screen which displays interest rates in a bank.

So called “Puer tea banks” had emerged in Yunnan and urban China along with Puer tea’s popularity. It is unclear how many there were. Puer tea investors could actually or virtually “store” their Puer tea in these banks and it was assumed that the teas’ value would increase, just like money earning interest. An earlier tea bank was established in Simao in 2005. It provided information and held events for individuals and enterprises on Puer tea purchasing, storage, transactions and auctions. In 2006, a large tea storehouse called Tianxia Cha Cang (天下茶仓), “tea storehouse for the world,” was established in Yuanjiang, a humid valley area in Yuxi in central Yunnan. Puer tea was stored there under controlled temperature and humidity conditions in order to hasten fermentation. It aimed to prove that Yunnan was not only good at producing but also good at storing, and it was said that all the stored Puer tea would have added value in the near future (Figure 4.7). All these events and actions, according to some commentators like the representatives at the symposium, had been excessively reported by the mass media and this had encouraged even more blind investment.

Figure 4.7: The tea storehouse in Yuanjiang.
Critical commentators said that there were other kinds of “overdone” behavior: large tea companies, who asked for excessive distribution fees and approved inauthentic production, were blamed; skillful bankers who purposely “played a trick” with individual investors were blamed; big traders who were hostile to Yunnan’s Puer tea were blamed; individual investors as well as consumers, who were too greedy and encountered bankruptcy, were also targets of blame as well as some sympathy.

Gao Zhao, a professor at Yunnan University and an expert in microbiology, regarded it as inappropriate that the tea academia of Yunnan had attempted to make Puer tea independent from the six established categories of Chinese tea. When I interviewed him he said that he thought it would still be better to put Puer tea in the dark tea category, since they shared many similarities in production procedures, although not all. Using an analogy, he said that one must admit that a person was a human being primarily, and then he could be further classified into a certain race. Making Puer tea independent, he said, was actually making it isolated and the isolated was vulnerable to attack. Speaking from his own tea storage experience, he told me that dark tea produced in Hunan and stored for a long time was also drinkable. Therefore, he said that the long-lasting feature was not a unique feature of Puer tea, but just that it had been over-emphasized.

Some comments I heard in the tea houses echoed Gao’s point of view. Tea drinkers complained that Puer tea’s supporters should not have criticized other tea when they tried to heat up Puer tea. This, they said, had violated the rule of advertising and damaged the profitability of other tea. Many people cited old Chinese sayings to criticize the aggressive promotion of Puer tea: “tall trees catch much wind” (shu da zhao feng, 树大招风), or “the bird that stands out is easily shot” (qiang da chu tou niao, 枪打出头鸟). To them, Puer tea’s downturn was confirming these old beliefs, commonly known to all Chinese. In traditional Chinese philosophy, originating from Taoism and applied in daily life, the number one position is dangerous because it is envied and easily attacked by others. This recalls the doctrines that are often suggested to a knight-errant wandering in the risky jianghu: he should not show off too much; he should hide his real thoughts and look humble even if he has high martial arts, or he would attract too many eyes and suffer from his distinction. When people reflected that Puer tea had been over speculated, propagandized and inappropriately redefined, they were suggesting that Puer tea had failed to obey a basic Chinese concept and was therefore attacked.
There was also the opposite opinion: that Puer tea hadn’t been cooked enough and was still too raw. When the symposium on the “Voices from Yunnan” was held, a special guest from Beijing, sat on the platform wearing sunglasses. His whole face had never been shown to the public, but his name, Wang Hai, was famous. He was known as “the pioneer of cracking down on counterfeits in China” (zhongguo da jia di yi ren, 中国打假第一人), and he had engaged in all sorts of activities to counter counterfeits. According to him, the report by the central media was not untrue and that the crisis lay in the unclear value of Puer tea. He raised a series of questions: Was Puer tea a drink or a medicine? Was it really a drinkable antique? What was the fake and what was the authentic? How could its exact age be known? Why didn’t people report it when they chanced upon the production of fake tea? Was there a clear and scientific regulation to supervise all of these issues? He hinted that the answer to his questions was “no.” As everyone knew, all of these problems hadn’t been solved or clarified by the authorities, the tea researchers, the tea companies and traders, or the consumers. As a result, most identification of Puer tea had to rely upon individual experience.

Wang Hai’s speech and other similar statements were calling for clearer and stronger regulations on Puer tea. Likewise, the propaganda sponsored by the state and implemented by the mass media, was thought to be insufficient and not high quality enough; the publishing on Puer tea, according to some commentators, hadn’t been related well to the “authentic” culture of Yunnan and hadn’t sufficiently shown the contributions of multiple ethnic minorities; it was not that Yunnan had produced excessive Puer tea but that the market didn’t have enough authentic Puer tea.

These points of view, regarding “inadequacy” and “raw,” were actually responding to the “over-cooked” argument in another way. They reflected the fact that the output of Puer tea and cultural packaging around it was increasing in quantity, but in terms of quality not many of these products were authentic. They highlighted the importance of a need for quality rather than quantity. When quality was bad, quantity became nothing but a waste. It implied that Puer tea had been overcooked as well as too raw, and it asked for a proper method to accurately identify the quality of Puer tea.

In fact, appeals for accuracy and more powerful regulation had been made even before Puer tea’s recession. But they had never been successful. For example, at the laboratory of a professor in an agricultural university, I was told that a scientific method was being
developed to shape a specific taste for Puer tea. This professor proposed "digitized Puer tea," namely to artificially control the production process of Puer tea quantitatively. However, before such a scientific approach was completely worked out, there were many oppositional voices. At many tea houses, I heard traders and consumers saying that the most charming characteristic of Puer tea lay in its endless variations; you never knew what the taste of a piece of Puer tea would be, and any attempt to fix or "digitize" it would be useless. A tea trader from Hong Kong responded sharply. He told me that he believed there could be some quantitative way to clearly define Puer tea's authenticity: "Such methods could be worked out if people wish," he said, "but then, you can imagine how boring the process of appreciating and distinguishing tea would become!"

This man is a "super" tea expert. He tasted many tea samples each day to make decisions for his business. He told me he once tasted so much that he experienced stomach pain and he had to go to hospital for an injection. After recovering, he paid more careful attention to how much he drank but he still kept on enjoying his own sensory tasting.

In Xishuangbanna, a local governmental official told me he thought it would be good if the origin of the tea material could be diagnosed from the textural characteristic of the tea leaf, like the method used in police investigations to trace somebody's foot or hand print. In this way, he said, people could identify whether the tea material was from Yiwu or Menghai, and whether it was made of forest tea or terrace tea. This idea was opposed, too. The opponents were not concerned about whether such a "scientific" method could actually work in technical terms, but they worried about whether it could be successfully implemented, as exemplified by the comment of another local official. This official expressed this concern very directly to me, "Even if there could be a way to tell where the tea material originates, I think after all it would be up to the key person involved to tell where it was from."

Therefore, once a proposal attempting to change the vague and raw image of Puer tea was put forward, opposed voices came along, arguing for going back to its original vagueness and raw situation. These concerns largely obstructed the implementation of all the proposed revolutionary ideas. And facing such endless debates, I had wondered whether vagueness itself was a regulation for Puer tea in the cultural and social context of China.
Conclusion: A Cultural Dilemma

Like Puer tea’s rise and fall in Yiwu, the whole Puer tea industry of Yunnan suffered from cooling after heating. Several things were blamed, and past efforts that had successfully packaged Puer tea as being of very high value were considered to have led to indigestion in the entire market.

Economic analysis coming out soon after the recession, as exemplified by the report of CCTV 2, which attributed the market downfall to excessive speculation, improper investment, blind zest and greediness. However, this economic analysis was regarded as “false” and even as one of the causes that accelerated Puer tea’s downfall. Then even more voices emerged to reflect upon the situation.

There is a continuing concern with “moderation,” one of the doctrines in Confucianism that is embodied in people’s everyday life. Food should not be cooked too much, nor should it be too raw, and everything must find its proper position, a middle ground. This basic belief is applied by Chinese to a person’s behavior, the relationship he has with others, and the way he understands objects. In diagnosing Puer tea’s recession, apart from blaming others who were antagonistic to Yunnan’s Puer tea, there was a strong element of self-criticism in public opinion. That is, Yunnan’s Puer tea came under attack because Yunnan itself, represented by the provincial government, had “cooked” Puer tea too much and damaged the interests of others. In contrast to David Harvey’s (1989) argument about the place-differentiating effect of globalization, this self-criticism encouraged people to fall back to a homogeneous “home,” which did not make itself too distinctive. Under this doctrine of moderation, there was also a concern with equality and compromise, exemplified by the updated definition that identified all production areas in Yunnan as the home of Puer tea.

This belief about moderation was challenged by the new culture of presenting oneself and accumulating profit. Even after the recession and faced with the “over-cooking” criticism, the provincial government still attempted to continue celebrating and promoting Puer tea. Any comment that criticized Puer tea was taken as negative, hostile and contrary to the interests of Yunnan. Truth or non-truth was never known and became unimportant. It only depended upon who it would benefit.
There was also a revolutionary voice appealing for a non-moderate and non-vague image for Puer tea. It asked for stronger, clearer, and more scientific regulations and supervision of Puer tea, saving it from being “too raw.” It hoped that through these methods Puer tea could become clearly identified. These appeals, however, encountered difficulties even before they could be put into practice. As a result, the “rawness” and vagueness continued, and the voices on defining Puer tea kept diverging.

All these debates show that the desire to package Puer tea and the alternative desire to unpack it had co-existed long before the actual recession. The contest between them had largely shaped the story of Puer tea from its heating to its cooling, and speculation became the fuse that hastened the transformation. The debate goes on endlessly, and so both in its rise and fall, Puer tea’s authenticity remained complex, multiple and vague. Even in terms of moderation, one of the strong themes in public opinion, it is not moderation that can be measured by any quantitative data, but it is more dependent on personal experience and inter-personal negotiation. The boundary between what is over cooked, what is still raw, and what is getting to moderation, is also very much contextually determined. People are encouraged by tradition to remain in the middle ground, but meanwhile they are taught in the new era to be able to present themselves effectively; they appeal for clarity, but in fact they enjoy vagueness. Thus it becomes a cultural dilemma for actors to decide how much Puer tea should be cooked.
Autumn

Figure 5.0: Yellow leaf Puer tea (*lao huang pian*, 老黄片) in Yiwu. Yellow leaf tea used to be regarded as the lowest quality tea material in Yiwu, and it was often kept in loose form and kept for family use rather than for sale. But after Puer tea's recent boom, yellow leaf tea was also pressed into cakes and sold for a good price.
Chapter 5 Puer Tea with Remorse

One often fears the coming of the Mid-Autumn Festival (Moon Festival),
For flowers and leaves turn yellow and wither.
Rivers flow to the eastern sea.
When can they flow back to the west?
If one does not work hard in his youth,
He might mourn on vain in his old age.


**Depression and Worries**

I went to Yiwu again in September 2007. It was mid-autumn, the other important season for tea harvest. Taking the bus from Jinghong, I arrived at Yiwu in the late afternoon, just as I had in spring. But something had changed. The main street was obviously quieter. The grocery stores and restaurants were open as normal, but with few customers the owners looked idle. Learning a lesson from my experience in spring, I had pre-booked a room with the guesthouse. But when I arrived, there were actually no other guests. The owners had left to visit friends, leaving their children to look after the guesthouse. The young people were frying and rolling the tea leaves picked that morning. This was something they had to do, since the tea buds had continued to bloom, but it was uncertain who this tea would be sold to.

The owners of the guesthouse came back from Jinghong one week later. The father, Zhang Da, looked depressed. He said to me:

In the wholesale tea markets of Jinghong that I have visited, or of Kunming that I have heard of, there are no customers at all these days. It would be a little better if there could be a few people going around and inquiring about anything to do with Puer tea even if they did not buy. But, it’s really bad that there are not even people inquiring.

Since the very beginning of autumn, some locals who had business alliances with outside traders had been to Jinghong, Kunming or Guangdong to find out what was happening in the urban market. Important information was brought back that a recession was happening on the Puer tea market everywhere. During spring, the price of tea material in Yiwu was high, around 400 RMB per kilogram for forest tea, and there were
many traders coming to compete in the trade. When autumn came, the price fell to around 100 RMB for the same kind of tea, and few traders came to buy.

Having enjoyed the happiness of a blooming price in spring, Yiwu people were frustrated by the big contrast in autumn. Suspicions arose about the change in the tea price and its future development. Mr. Guan, an old man of seventy asked me to tell him more about the situation of Puer tea in urban areas as he could not go there personally. He asked me a serious question: “do you think our tea price will go back to the very low level it used to be before?” What he referred to in particular was the period from the 1950s to the 1980s when the price of tea material in Yiwu was less than 5 RMB per kilogram. The question initially sounded absurd because there was so big a gap between 5 RMB and more than 100 RMB or even more than 400 RMB for one kilogram of Puer tea. When the price was only 5 RMB, tea was nothing and was even despised as “negative capitalism” especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (see also Zeng Zhixian 2001: 93). If the tea price went back to 5 RMB per kilogram, it would tell people that Puer tea was valueless and negative. How could this happen again?

When Mr. Guan asked me this question, we were sitting in the courtyard of his house. The house was very recently built and it cost almost 250,000 RMB. It was a two-storey modern brick concrete house with an antique-style finish on the railings (Figure 5.1). From the 1950s to the 1970s his family had lived in a thatched shed; in 1987 he built a tile-roofed house; in 1992 he built a simple brick house that cost 50,000 RMB, which was later used as a guesthouse; in 2005 he built a new brick house for 180,000 RMB, which he sold later in order to build the present one in a new location. In the center of the present courtyard a car was parked. Its price, I was told, was 130,000 RMB. For Yiwu families being able to afford to build such a house and buy such a car, prosperity was mostly attributed to the blooming tea business in recent years. The development of Puer tea had shaped change in almost every corner of Yiwu. During fieldwork I often heard many tea drinkers say that tea couldn’t be equated with rice, implying that eating basic foodstuff is more important than drinking tea no matter how valuable the tea is. But for people in Yiwu tea had become equal to rice, and the fact was that they were eating fully and living better all because of tea. But when I paid attention to the anxious expression in the old man’s eyes, I began to think about the reasons for him to have such concerns.
Examining the politics of food in China through three works of popular literature, Judith Farquhar (2002) invites us to rethink the famous saying by Mencius: “appetite for food and sex is nature” (shi se xing ye, 食色性也). When Chinese people became wealthier after the reform era, it was easily taken for granted that this saying was true. But, as Farquhar (2002: 3) shows through the novels, in the past Maoist period (1949 to the late 1970s) when China experienced hunger and when class struggle rather than eating was deemed more important, “the existence and indulgence of non-collective appetites were almost an embarrassment.”

Examining the contrasting attitudes towards eating between the past (the Maoist period) and the present (since the early 1980s), Farquhar attributes the highly indulgent consumption in contemporary China to the unforgettable shortage of food in the past. As an anthropologist as well as a practitioner in Chinese medicine, Farquhar uses the holistic way of treating illness for the individual body as a metaphor for curing diseases for the national body. Hence the present repletion, whether for the individual or for the nation, is diagnosed in terms of past depletion. Therefore, Farquhar (2002: 10) argues that “everyday life in reform China is still inhabited by the nations’ Maoist past.” In this regard, the point “appetite for food and sex is nature” is not always true but “timely”

---

1 They all touched upon eating: The White-haired Girl was written in the 1940s; Hibiscus town and The gourmet were both published in the 1980s.
(Farquhar 2002: 2). Moreover, she asks us to carefully consider “habitus,” a concept proposed by Bourdieu (1984). She thinks that many scholars have misread habitus “as ahistorical and deterministic” (Farquhar 2002: 8). But to her, habitus, in Bourdieu’s original interpretation, is “open to history and many unexpected variations.” She argues that habitus is universally situated in mundane daily life, and in particular in China it is “contingent on the events and conditions” of the Maoist era and the reform period (Farquhar 2002: 9).

The contrasting historical periods Farquhar examines in her work echo the contrasts I will consider in this chapter. Her suggestions about linking past experiences to present orientations also sheds light on my analysis of tea. As I will show in this chapter, the local attitudes towards Puer tea have long been shaped by domestic policy and wider external impacts. Just as Mencius’s saying should be looked at contextually, the present value of Puer tea in Yiwu should not be taken as natural, rather it should be re-read flexibly as “responding to the specific character of place, time and person” (Farquhar 2002: 108). Nor are the appetites of local production and consumption on Puer tea shaped by a fixed habitus. In fact, they have been changed back and forth by many unexpected factors. In other words, there has never been a singular habitus that could tell the locals clearly what is true and what is untrue about Puer tea. But notably, each specific appetite or habitus at one moment has important connotations and references for another, just like Farquhar diagnoses that present repletion is rooted in past depletion. So, the root causes of the present worries are not only found in the recent rise and fall of the market. They also need to be looked at through the shadow of the past. And “worries” does not simply refer to worrying. These “worries” also contain more reflective thinking about the vicissitudes of Puer tea. As Ortner (2006: 11) argues, “history is not just about the past, nor is it always about change. It may be about duration, about patterns persisting over long periods of time.”

**A Brief History from Nationalized to Private Tea Business in Yiwu**

In popular books on Puer tea and in local stories about Yiwu, the historical period from the mid-eighteenth to the early-twentieth century is described as a time when cha zhuang, private tea companies, were prosperous in Yiwu (Zhang Yingpei 2006; Zhang Yi 2006a; Ran Dianrong 2005a; Deng Shihai 2004). People enjoyed recalling the stories about how the tea business was extended to other Southeast Asian areas and how tea
became the dominant element in local livelihoods. At that time, little rice was produced in Yiwu, rather it was obtained via exchange for tea (Jiang Quan 2006: 46).

After the late 1930s, Yiwu’s private tea business suffered from war and other turmoil, but it still struggled to revive once the situation was stable. Soon after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, privately-owned tea companies became nationalized in the early 1950s. Tea was brought under a state monopoly on buying and selling. After the raw production process, many basic tea materials produced in Yiwu were carried to the national tea factories outside for the fine production process. This arrangement lasted for almost half a century until the private tea business was revived in the late 1990s.

Contemporary popular books on Puer tea rarely mention the period when the tea business was nationalized. And few Yiwu people actively talked about it, in contrast to their talent for telling stories about the prosperous period that preceded it. For many locals, this period was simply the period when Yiwu became only a supplier of tea material for national tea factories, and telling such an inglorious story would do nothing positive for today’s tea development. Mr. Guan’s anxious question and the low prices paid in the past, however, made me realize that this period was never actually forgotten. Together with the previous historical glory, it was rooted in local people’s memory as an important reference point when they considered their current and future livelihood. Throughout this period there were four notable changes around Puer tea in Yiwu: the changing relationship between tea and rice; the mode of tea planting; the definition of Puer tea; and the increase in the tea price. All of them had been changing according to the government’s variable tea policy.

First of all, from the 1950s to the 1980s the development of tea production took place within the context of the high priority placed on food production. Yiwu is located in a mountainous area. Its average altitude is 1,300 meters. In the past many highland areas had long been used for tea growing, while the flatter lowlands were used for planting rice, corn or legumes. However, due to the food shortage from the 1950s to the 1980s, many highland areas were converted to food production. Yi liang wei gang (以粮为纲), literally planting food as a guiding principle, was the slogan for most of this period when basic consumption goods were deficient. In local people’s memory, from the

---

2 A collectively-owned tea factory was established in the early 1990s in Yiwu. Then tea materials produced locally were also sent to it.
1950s to the 1970s was the “hungry period,” when at least one third of the local families were *que liang hu* (缺粮户), grain-deficient households, that had to survive by relying on minor cereals and relief food. The early 1960s was the most difficult time when China was suffering from a disastrous famine and economic crisis. As Mr. Guan told me, in those years half of the local food grain had to be handed to the state, and with little remaining food many people had to survive by going to the mountains and collecting taro or wild vegetables. Rice production developed generally slowly and this was attributed by the local people to the inefficient collective working system and the lack of technology at that time.

Tea production developed slowly, too. When food was really in short supply, tea trees in some areas were cut down and the fields were converted to rice production (see also YTIEC 1993: 20). Tea farmers worked less actively due to the low value of the tea, and at times the income from tea was so bad that it could “only provide income to buy salt and pepper,” as one Yiwu resident told me. Despite this situation, tea was still the main source of Yiwu people’s income. The paradox at that time was that the development of tea must give priority to food production, but food was still in short supply even with some income from tea.

Second, although food production had been kept as the focus, there were several periods when tea production was emphasized and boosted due to specific political reasons. In 1958 there was the Great Leap Forward, a movement stressing quantity rather than quality of production. Encouraged by blind enthusiasm, people worked too hard, and many tea trees were over-picked, which actually violated the normal manner of tea cultivation (see also YTIEC 1993: 20).

The next upsurge was in 1974, responding to the request to improve tea areas by the national conference on tea held that year (YTIEC 1993: 22). But because this was during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), political movements rather than tea production were the priority, and tea production did not develop much (see also Etherington and Forster 1993).

It was after the Cultural Revolution ended and when China began the policy of Reform and Opening Up (the late 1970s and early 1980s) that a new system of cultivation had a greater impact on Yiwu’s tea production. It was then that the food deficiency problem was relieved and the government began to encourage people to work harder on tea. In
the 1970s, tea fields were re-allocated from the collectives to private ownership. In the early 1980s tea seedlings were brought in from other tea regions of Yunnan such as Lincang and Jiangcheng. Local peasants were encouraged to plant them without pay (see also EMBCA 1994: 227). In 1982, the inhabitants of a sub-village in Yiwu became full-time tea peasants (Mengla Archive 1982). As for the method of planting, a new mode of arranging tea in regular and dense terraces was advocated in order to boost output. This new method of cultivation was taken as scientific and advanced at that time because it made it easier for farmers to manage the tea fields and increase their tea output. Zhang Yi, who worked in the Yiwu government at that time (he later became the pioneer of the revived private tea business in Yiwu in the mid 1990s) took a team to learn the scientific way of planting from neighboring tea regions in Menghai and then popularized it in Yiwu. Trimming was regularly undertaken in order to keep these new terrace teas in bush form, otherwise they would grow as tall as the older tea trees, which were the actual botanic form of tea (Figure 5.2 and 5.3). Tender tea buds rather than rough tea leaves or tea stems were appreciated. Meanwhile old tea trees that were over two meters were pollarded (Figure 5.4 and 5.5). They had been grown for generations, scattered in the forest, and become tall and low yielding. Cutting them short encouraged rapid re-growth as well as making picking more convenient. At that time, all these new forms and operations were taken as scientific methods, and in comparison all the old ways of forest planting were regarded as primitive and backward. The differences between terrace tea and forest tea, and between pollarded and non-pollarded forest tea, was not an important matter until Puer tea bloomed again in Yiwu at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

---

3 Some local people told me that in the 1960s terrace tea planting had also been advocated, but not the scale of the early 1980s. This information was echoed in the Mengla County Annals (EBMCA1994: 226).
Figure 5.2: Terrace tea is easier to pick.

Figure 5.3: Forest tea is harder to pick.

Figure 5.4: After being pollarded, tea trees produce many new branches and multiple trunks.
The third important feature of this period of tea nationalization was that the definition of “Puer tea” was actually very vague, unimportant, or even lost for Yiwu people. Talking with many locals, I found out that they seldom regarded the tea product during the nationalized period as Puer tea, instead they called it shai qing maocha (晒青毛茶), sun dried basic tea material. This maocha were sent to national tea factories for fine production, a process which Yiwu people didn’t need to care about anymore. This maocha, in people’s old concept, was not Puer tea, because it was loose rather than being made into a pressed form as today, and neither did people drink it after years of storing. Instead they drank it as fresh as possible. Once some maocha turned bad, they would definitely throw it away, unlike today when they store tea as a proud capital declaring “the older the better.” I was told by locals that the practice of long-term storage didn’t come to Yiwu until after it was “re-discovered” by the Taiwanese in the mid 1990s. What was ironic and confusing was also that the way people prepared the maocha for the national factories, was exactly the same as the way they prepared the maocha for their own private business nowadays. But they regarded the former as being
more like green tea, while the latter was definitely declared to be Puer tea, or at least it was called the basic tea material of Puer tea.  

Fourth, the tea price increased very slowly from the 1950s to the early 1990s. As Figure 5.6 shows, it took almost 10 years for the tea price to increase from 0.20 RMB (1950) to 1.00 RMB (1959), and then it took more than 30 years to reach 10.00 RMB (1992). Xu Kun, the head of the Xishuangbanna Supervision Bureau of Technology and Quality, remembered very well that in 1992, when the tea price in Xishuangbanna was only 10 RMB per kilogram, he was visited by a special guest from Hong Kong. This guest suggested that the local tea production should be placed under better supervision, because he had witnessed how “lazy” the local peasants were when they worked in the tea fields and he felt it was a pity that good tea material was without good management. This is an indication that since the early 1990s people from Puer tea consumption areas, such as Hong Kong (and, soon after, Taiwan) had been attracted by the value of Puer tea and started paying attention to the situation in the production area. Though his impression about laziness might well be a prejudiced view of local production techniques, the fact was that the local people hadn’t started actively working on tea due to the still unattractive tea price.

In summary, tea production in Yiwu from the 1950s to the 1980s and before the late 1990s was very much shaped by the political situation and the government’s policy. The development of tea had to give priority to rice during the period of food deficiency, though, in fact, both of them developed slowly. In certain political situations, especially after China entered into its reform policy era, tea planting was boosted. But the main features of this period, in particular the “scientific” mode of tea cultivation and the low value of Puer tea, contrasted strongly with the situation after Puer tea re-bloomed in the 1990s. The contrast between the previous hard period and the later prosperous time became deeply rooted in the memory of local people like Mr. Guan. When the Puer tea recession arrived in 2007, they naturally recalled the earlier contrasts and the constant changes, and therefore major concerns about local livelihoods were aroused.

---

4 For the difference between green tea and Puer tea, please see chapter 3 and chapter 8.
Figure 5.6: Tea Price in Yiwu from 1950 to 2007. Source: Data between 1950 and 1990 is derived from YTIEC (2007: 69-71); data from 1986 to 2007 is based on fieldwork interviews.

**Food or Tea**

The transition from the nationalized period to the partly private current era, created many changes in Yiwu’s tea industry. Now, for example, outside traders were worried that some locals were working too hard, over-picking the trees which was considered to have a negative impact on the tea’s normal growth. In the spring of 2007 I witnessed the daily work of many tea growers, picking tea leaves with great effort despite the difficulty of reaching the leaves from forest trees (see Film 2 on DVD 1 ■). They told me the hard work was very worthwhile, because the teas they were picking could be sold at around 400 RMB per kilogram at that moment. Picking terrace tea was easier work, but it was only sold for 100 RMB per kilogram at that time. According to local calculation, it meant that the annual rice requirement for a family of four could be purchased with the income from only one month of forest tea work, and extra money would be saved for house building and other expenses.

The busiest outdoor scene in Yiwu happened every morning between seven and eight o’clock. It was an open-air market in central Yiwu along the main street, with vendors selling all kinds of foodstuffs (Figure 5.7). In the market I often met Mr. Zheng, who came to shop at this time every day. Like most locals, his family didn’t use a
refrigerator, and he had to buy basic foodstuff for cooking every day. Before starting his Puer tea business in 2005, Mr. Zheng didn’t come to the morning market every day, or at least he didn’t need to buy as many foodstuffs as he now does. Like most Yiwu people, he used to raise pigs and chickens, cultivate rice fields and plant various vegetables for household use. But in recent years the Puer tea business had been taking more and more of the family’s time and energy, and all the other activities had to cede their position to Puer tea. The QS also had set strict rules on tea production, leaving less space for livestock. Although people running tea businesses tried hard to keep several pigs, they used them only on special occasions, and went to the market for normal daily requirements. At Mr. Zheng’s house, there was now not a single hen or pig. Even the family production of soy sauce (Figure 5.8), a custom that Yiwu people had inherited from their ancestors in Shiping in southeast Yunnan, had been stopped as Mr. Zheng worried that the strong smell of soy sauce would affect his tea. Therefore, for Mr. Zheng’s family, most of the things needed for eating had to be obtained from the market, leaving Puer tea as the only notable thing of family making.

It was tea rather than anything else that was helping local families to live better lives. Over four months in the spring of 2007, I’d witnessed or participated in numerous sha zhu fan (杀猪饭), rural family banquets that involve slaughtering a pig and inviting relatives or close friends to share in the feast. The pig, for many people who were engaged in Puer tea, was usually bought from the market rather than family fed. In the past when rice was insufficient, banquets like this were very rare even during festivals; ten years ago, such banquets would only be possible in Yiwu during the Chinese New Year or a wedding ceremony. But now many families had more than one banquet each year. The obvious reason for this was the rising income from tea (Figure 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11).
Figure 5.7: Pigs sold at the market.

Figure 5.8: Family-based soy sauce making.
Figure 5.9: Young men helped with serving at a wedding ceremony.

Figure 5.10: Dishes at the wedding banquet. The right bottom one is tea.
Figure 5.11: The newly married couple.

Figure 5.12: Mr. He starting to re-plough his rice field.
After becoming engaged in the Puer tea business in recent years, many families had abandoned their rice fields. In October 2007, I conducted a survey of 23 families living in the old street of central Yiwu. They were all engaged in tea production, but there were only two families who were still growing rice. The desolate rice fields were either unused, or converted to tea cultivation, or rented to immigrants from other ethnic groups. Tea instead of rice had become the mainstay of local livelihoods. As in the time of their successful ancestors, present-day Yiwu people ate rice imported from other regions such as Menghai, purchased with their income from tea. They drank tea when their stomachs were full. Like many urban tea drinkers, or even like the royal families more than a century ago, they drank tea as a way to get rid of greasiness.

These lifestyle changes would have been accepted by Yiwu people as a normal phenomenon if the Puer tea trade had continued blooming. However, the recession in the Puer tea market cast a negative shadow over their prosperity. The past experience of food deficiency and the memory of low value tea was recalled by some local people in this new time of uncertainty. When the price of tea suddenly dropped in 2007, the locals in Yiwu were faced again with the changeable landscape of Puer tea. Faced with the recession, they worried about the prospects of the Puer tea business and their livelihoods. Furthermore, they wondered whether the existing criteria on Puer tea would be changed yet again. The problem they were facing was not only “what to live by” but also “what to believe in.”

Many local people compared the downturn of Puer tea with the continuously rising price of other food. The price of rice was stable because it was under state control. But, as Mr. Zheng told me, for vegetables and pork, there had been one or two price rises from 2006 to 2007. When the tea price came down in autumn of 2007, the other prices didn’t. The increasing price of pork made people regret that they had not raised more pigs, but soon they realized that this was impossible: pigs eat corn, but the mountain fields for planting corn had been converted to tea and, moreover, they did not have any extra time to work on crops apart from tea.

Some locals began to think about other alternatives. Some people quit tea and turned to mining, as Yiwu has lead and zinc resources. Some people also began planting rubber even though it was known that rubber should be planted lower than 1000 meters, while Yiwu’s average altitude is 1300 meters. I asked locals how they compared tea and
rubber. Some people who had started rubber planting answered like this: “in the past five years Puer tea of course was more profitable. We would stick to it if it didn’t meet trouble. After all it is something inherited from our ancestors. But you see, rubber has a more stable situation, and it is necessary even during wartime.”

Whatever alternatives there were for the locals, rice and other basic subsistence crops like corn and legumes were things that no one would forget. The slogan *yi liang wei gang*, planting grains as a guiding principle, although promoted during the Maoist period, had been learnt by heart and was easily recalled by the local people. When I talked to people during the survey, many were wondering whether they should re-establish rice fields, as the prospect of Puer tea was uncertain. Mr. He was one of the pioneers who quickly took such action. He started a Puer tea business around 2004. As a result of QS, in 2007 he had to start building a modern tea factory two kilometers away from his house. Not long after the Puer tea recession, even though he was tied down by the new investment, he managed to find some time to start reclaiming a rice field, which was less than half a kilometer away from his home but had been abandoned for several years (Figure 5.12). Watching this sixty-year-old man working hard with a hoe on the desolate land, a scene which had been steadily disappearing in Yiwu, I thought of the famous saying by Chairman Mao, which was also often cited by the locals: *shou zhong you liang, xin li bu huang* (手中有粮心里不慌), literally, you will not feel panic if you have rice in your hands.

Just as Chinese never forget to link tea to its specific cultural value, neither do they forget to treat rice as a fundamental basis of livelihood. Even between ordinary acquaintances, the Chinese greet by asking whether the other has eaten rice or not. As an elderly man, Mr. He had witnessed many vicissitudes from social turmoil to stability, the changeable relationship between rice and tea, and the variable ways of managing Puer tea. His hard work on both tea and rice proved the popular saying that one should “hope for the best and prepare for the worst.” His down-to-earth feeling of confidence could be seen from the way he dug up his land. Though he still continued his tea business, it was obvious that there were many things he felt uncertain about. The many ways of producing and consuming Puer tea had been changed throughout his life and these recollections aroused anxiety and remorse.

---

5 I mentioned him in Chapter 2 and will tell his case in detail in the next chapter.
Forest Tea or Terrace Tea

After the Reform and Opening-up of China, the main impact on Yiwu’s tea business was turning from the pressure of state policy to the demands of the external market. Since the mid 1990s, Yiwu’s Puer tea has been in great demand by outside traders, initially from Taiwan and Hong Kong and afterwards from other areas of urban mainland China. Compared with the slow rise in the tea price from the 1950s to the early 1990s, there has been a rapid upsurge since the mid 1990s, especially after 2003 (Figure 5.6). And as Figure 5.13 shows, since 2004 a price difference has developed between terrace tea and the more expensive forest tea. In chapter 2, I have shown how local and outside traders competed in distinguishing “authentic” tea material. The highest level of authenticity was forest tea, picked from trees that had not been pollarded, from certain tea regions with a good and natural forest ecosystem. The most expensive forest tea sold for 460 RMB per kilo in the spring of 2007 exemplified this standard. There was an agreement between outside traders and local producers about the basis for this: forest tea is older than terrace tea and has accumulated more nutritional substances; non-pollarded forest tea is even better although it grows slower than pollarded tea; forest tea is dispersed in a healthy ecosystem, with sufficient space between trees and good shade from other plants. For all these reasons many people came to believe that drinking forest tea is healthier. Terrace tea, by contrast, is younger, arranged narrowly, and given the much less natural ecosystem pesticide and chemical fertilizer is regularly applied (although some local people declared that on their terrace tea they used manure as fertilizer). And of course, picking forest tea from tall and scattered trees takes much more effort than terrace tea. Moreover, forest tea’s output is far less than that of terrace tea, and this scarcity increases the price.
Like urban consumers seeking aged Puer tea products in tea shops, outside and local traders in rural Yiwu sought basic tea material made from forest tea. As it was hard to judge the exact origin of the tea material, a final judgement was made from tasting. People around the tea table reached an agreement that forest tea tasted much better than terrace tea, with longer huigan (回甘), lingering after-taste. And one trader from Kunming who I met in Yiwu told me that his body had become very alert to those teas that had been treated with pesticide: soon after drinking pesticide-treated tea he could not help vomiting. In Yiwu, there was a nice story about a child, only three years old, who knew that forest tea was better. Usually an adult gave him a tiny sip of tea and tested him by asking whether this was forest tea or terrace tea. Without too much serious effort, and without knowing what kind it actually was, the child responded immediately that it was forest tea. Then all the people around laughed and praised how clever the child was because he had learnt that forest tea was more valuable and should be mentioned more often.

This idea was widely acknowledged in Yiwu, and no one doubted its truth, just like some people adopt Mencius’s theory that “appetite for food and sex is nature” as true without contextual thinking. But hadn’t the locals in Yiwu previously celebrated planting terrace tea, pollarding forest tea and adopting “scientific” methods of tea cultivation? Yes, but “Who could predict today’s situation? If we knew earlier, we
would not have done that.” Many locals answered like this, full of remorse. With this sentiment, people complained that Zhang Yi should not have helped to popularize terrace tea and the pollarding of forest tea, even though they had to admit that he had contributed to the more recent bloom of the private tea business in Yiwu. Actually, I saw that many people, including Zhang Yi, were trying their best to improve the cultivation of their terrace tea. They enlarged the gap between each tea bush and transplanted spare ones into other vacant areas. Then they let the terrace tea plant grow in a wider area, hoping that it would eventually turn into a tall tree. They were trying to undo some of their previous mistakes. The following two cases will further illustrate how there was a significant contrast between the past and the present in standards of tea cultivation. This contrast generated a complex feeling of remorse amongst many local people.

Among the Six Great Tea Mountains, Yiwu was the one that most enthusiastically adopted terrace tea and pollarding during the early 1980s. And within Yiwu, it was the sub-villages around the center that adopted these modern techniques most. This geographical distribution was explained by locals in terms of ethnic difference. Among the Six Great Tea Mountains Yiwu had the largest population of Han, with central Yiwu as the typical case. Other tea mountains and areas were more mixed with Yi, Dai, Yao, Hani, Jinu and Bulang. Han people explained that they had always been working harder on tea cultivation than other ethnic groups, and they felt that planting terrace tea and pollarding forest tea was a “scientific” way of improving production. Zhao Chengjiong, who was still working in the Yiwu government office, once explained to me: hanren geng tinghua (汉人更听话), that is, Han people were more inclined to obey the rules set by the government. In this perspective, other ethnic groups were depicted as backward, lazy and disobedient.

I was wondering whether such “laziness” was rooted in taboos observed by some ethnic groups. Some of the original tea planters such as the Hani and Bulang, traditionally regarded tea trees as sacred plants, which should not be cut or damaged (Maule 1991; Shi Junchao 1999; Xu Jianchu 2007). However, my idea was overturned when I visited Gaoshan, a sub-village of Yiwu inhabited by Yi (but the inhabitants recognized themselves as Xiangtang). People there didn’t relate tea trees to any religious worship or taboo, and many explained the past non-pollarding as “yiqian bu zhongshi” (以前不重视), meaning that they were indifferent to tea in the past. Gaoshan was 13 kilometers
away from central Yiwu. Nowadays it was famous for its valuable forest teas that had never been pollarded (see Film 5 on DVD 2). When the forest tea price in central Yiwu was around 400 RMB during spring of 2007, it had been 460 RMB in Gaoshan. Staying in Gaoshan I saw the locals greet potential clients passionately. And sitting in central Yiwu, I met Gaoshan people carrying a basket of basic tea material for door-to-door retailing. In the opinion of some tea traders in central Yiwu, these Gaoshan people were crafty, often carrying terrace teas from other areas to simulate the forest teas of Gaoshan. Rather than being lazy or backward, once Puer tea became valuable, they were working as hard as Han people. Perhaps nothing but the low value of tea in the past was the main reason for their non-pollarding. In fact, the so-called laziness and backwardness had become a great advantage nowadays. Now it was not the people of Gaoshan who were remorseful. It was the Han people who were regretting their once diligent work.

So in the above case, pollarding or non-pollarding was initially attributed to ethnic difference, but as the situation changed non-pollarding brought glory to the non-Han ethnic group while pollarding generated remorse for the Han. In the next case, the feeling of remorse was more complexly and emotionally aroused.

In central Yiwu, many people strongly suggested that I should visit Mr. Hu, because he had large areas of forest teas, which had been pollarded less seriously. I did, and Mr. Hu was happy that I asked his permission to visit his forest tea. It had often happened that locals acted as a guide for travelers to see the forest tea without his permission, or even declared the trees to be their own to outsiders who were unaware of the facts.

Although he was seventy years old, Mr. Hu walked steadily in front of me, without slowing down, on those rugged mountain paths. The deeper we went, the moister the dirt road became. There forest got thicker and shade increased. After about half an hour we came to tea trees over two meters high. I asked about their age. Mr. Hu could not tell exactly, but he said they had been growing here when he was a child and his mother had come to pick them regularly. But he said the tallest and thickest one was at least 500 years old, according to a tea expert from Korea. It was the champion among all the tea on this mountain, almost four meters high and stretching out on a very steep slope beside a valley. I wondered how hard it would be for pickers to work on these old trees.
Mr. Hu said all these teas were inherited from his ancestor who used to own almost all of this small mountain. During the nationalized period, the area belonged to the collective, but actually it was still Mr. Hu’s family working on it. Since the late 1970s, it had been reallocated to his family and became privately owned again. Many of the trees, even the “champion” tree, had been pollarded following the state’s promotion of this technique. But the pollarding was done at a relatively high position on the trunk. Mr. Hu told me he hesitated to do so at that time, as he thought it was not easy for these tea trees to grow and reach that height. And the pollarding was not completely applied because of its large area (Figure 5.14).

I followed Mr. Hu further into the forest and saw more forest tea. Although not as tall and thick as the champion, many of them had a very good shape, with straight trunks and flourishing leaves. Mr. Hu told me most of these forest tea trees belonged to his eighth son Hu Ba, his youngest child (Figure 1.15). Mr. Hu had eight children, four sons and four daughters. Apart from one son who had died and one daughter who was in Simao, all the other children lived in central Yiwu and worked on tea, with tea fields allocated by Mr. Hu. The three sons used to work in Mengla, but they had all come back to Yiwu for more promising work on tea.

After passing by Hu Ba’s forest teas, we came to a field of terrace tea, planted in the early 1980s and belonging to Mr. Hu’s third son Hu San (Figure 5.16). Although some of the terraces had been transformed from dense into more dispersed planting, there was no doubt that they would still be called terrace tea. I wondered whether the allocation of tea fields would cause family conflict, since forest tea was much more valuable than terrace tea. And I wondered if this was proof of the Han Chinese custom that the youngest child is favored by the parents.

The six children all lived in central Yiwu, actually as neighbors. Mr. Hu lived with Hu Ba, the youngest one. After two hours lingering in the tea mountain, I followed Mr. Hu back to his house for a cup of tea. He put some loose tea in a glass for me, while he used cylindrical enamelware for himself as did many locals in Yiwu. He told me this tea we were drinking was forest tea, but he apologized because it was toasted rather than sun-dried due to the rainy weather in the previous days. Whatever it was, I felt that the tea tasted very good, because it came after a pleasant sweaty tea trip, and I was very

---

6 Sun-dried tea is regarded as better than that of being toasted. The local people only bake the tea material when it is rainy, or when there is an urgent production demand.
thankful to this old man who had kindly guided me to his forest tea and told me many interesting stories.

Figure 5.14: Mr. Hu and his forest tea.

Figure 5.15: Forest tea belonging to Hu Ba.
Figure 5.16: Terrace tea belonging to Hu San.

Figure 5.17: Hu Ba’s wife told me her mother-in-law fell down from this tea tree.
I heard more stories when I met the children of Mr. Hu. One story answered one of my questions about family allocation of fields. I was told by Hu Ba that it was an accident that he was allocated forest tea. When Mr. Hu allocated his tea fields to the children, Hu Ba was still working in Mengla. His brother Hu San got the priority to choose. At that time, terrace tea rather than forest tea was regarded as more “scientific” and much easier to manage. Hu San therefore chose terrace tea first. When Hu Ba came back, only the forest teas were left for him.

Now Hu Ba, the eighth son of Mr. Hu, was benefiting from working on forest teas. He told me that all his forest teas were now exclusively sold to a Korean woman under contract. Hu Ba and his wife Zou called her gan ma (干妈), sworn mother. The Korean gan ma continued this business with them even after Puer tea encountered difficulties in the domestic market during the summer of 2007. With such a stable client, Hu Ba’s family didn’t need to worry at all about an outlet for his tea.

Hu Ba’s wife told me another story, which was perhaps too sad for Mr. Hu or Hu Ba to recall. Hu Ba’s mother used to pick tea from their forest trees. Unfortunately one day she fell down from the tallest one, the champion tree that I had seen. It was so big a fall that she died soon after, when Hu Ba was only seven or eight years old. The accident happened around two years before the pollarding movement formally began (Figure 5.17).

According to the contemporary point of view, it was lucky that some forest tea belonging to Mr. Hu’s family had escaped pollarding. And these two stories, one about Hu Ba’s “fortune,” the other about his mother’s misfortune, were interlaced with paradoxical feelings about forest tea. The death of Hu Ba’s mother gave the whole family a good reason to hate forest tea. In Yiwu I had heard other stories of death or injury arising out of picking forest tea. Before the 1990s forest tea was nothing, and people were not really working hard on it as they did today. Some unpredictable and misfortunate events no doubt had given them very good reason to celebrate the pollarding and the new planting of terrace tea. If this logic still held, things would be simple, and people would know precisely what to hate and what to love. However, that logic was overturned when the Puer tea bloom happened again in Yiwu in the late 1990s. Now no one would doubt that Hu Ba should definitely celebrate his fortunate choice of
forest tea. The unexpected event of his mother's death, in many Yiwu people's words, was just because of *bu xiao xin* (不小心), carelessness.

The relative value of forest and terrace tea has been reversed over the past 20 years. Forest tea was the original form practiced by local tea farmers. But it was viewed as a "primitive" and "backward" method in the eyes of the reformers who popularized "scientific" terrace tea during the early 1980s. However, influenced by the new value of tea after the late 1990s, the "scientific" way was overturned, and the identity of forest tea was clarified as "traditional" and associated with "environment protection" and "authenticity." Many local people draw upon the present value to celebrate or to regret, trying to forget about their very different attitude in the past. For those who had participated in promoting the terrace form but now had to join in celebrating the forest form, it was an awkward moment. Such awkwardness was a hybrid result of the past that was more dominated by the planned economy, and the present that was more influenced by the market economy. A Chinese saying very effectively describes such a capricious situation: *san shi nian he dong, san shi nian he xi* (三十年河东，三十年河西), thirty years on the east river bank, the next thirty years on the west river bank. The awkwardness of the old reformers would not be released unless appreciation swung back to terrace tea again. But no one knew what would happen next.

*Acquired Taste for the Aged*

Paralleling the changed value for forest and terrace tea material, there was the transformed value for fresh and aged Puer tea. As I have mentioned, during the nationalized period, the concept of Puer tea was very vague in Yiwu, and local people threw tea away once it was more than a few years old. Now, everyone said that aged Puer tea was much more valuable, in the same way that they now appreciated forest tea rather than terrace tea. And likewise, this had aroused a feeling of remorse, and people in Yiwun regretted that they had not started storing tea earlier, though paradoxically they kept on drinking raw Puer tea due to the unavailability of aged ones as well as the customized palate that had been passed on from older to younger generations.
Many Yiwu locals told me that these changes could all be attributed to the Taiwanese, who preferred forest tea resources and aged Puer tea products. Even some traders from Kunming and Guangdong who had contact with Taiwanese traders also confirmed this Taiwanese influence. Mostly, Yiwu people were full of gratitude for the Taiwanese influence, and many locals directly said that it was the Taiwanese who helped the residents of Yiwu to have a better living. Nevertheless, when faced with the market recession, people began to question whether the older criteria or the newer Taiwanese criteria would be appropriate.

Since Yiwu was “discovered” by a group of tea explorers from Taiwan, its private tea business had gradually increased. According to Zhang Yi, from 1995 to 1999 he was the only one who was beginning to make Puer tea in Yiwu. And his clients were predominantly Taiwanese. After 2002, more families emulated him and set up business connections with traders from Taiwan and Hong Kong. By 2004 there were 20 families running private tea businesses (Zhao Rubi 2006: 33). And by 2007 there were 50 families who were running private tea businesses, and their clients were now also from areas in China such as Guangdong, Beijing and Kunming.

Zhao Chengjiong, who worked in the government office of Yiwu Township and participated in the reception for the Taiwanese in 1994 (see also chapter 1), said that he learned how to pin cha (品茶, taste tea with particular care) initially from Taiwanese people: “they taught me to use small tea bowls instead of big ones. They said that tea should be tasted slowly (man man pin, 慢慢品), rather than only be drunk for quenching thirst.” When recalling this, Zhao was using small tea bowls made of glass to serve Puer tea in his tea shop (Figure 5.18, 5.19).

Xu Kun, the head of the Xishuangbanna Supervision Bureau of Technology and Quality, said that many of the recovered techniques on how to make caked Puer tea was also due to people from Taiwan and Hong Kong, who gave feedback and brought antique Puer tea as a model.

Tajima Tomokiy (田岛知清), a Japanese researcher who has studied Yiwu for almost ten years, once commented to me: “Yiwunese are totally run by Taiwanese.” Tajima’s

---

7 I interviewed some traders from both Hong Kong and Taiwan. Generally speaking, it is acknowledged that forest tea preference was initiated by the Taiwanese. But the habit and concept of storing and drinking aged Puer tea was initiated by Hong Kong people, and later on co-developed by the Taiwanese.
comment revealed a kind of critical attitude towards both the Taiwanese and residents of Yiwu: the former was too dominant, while the latter was too passive. But in the words of the Yiwu people, they were full of gratitude for the Taiwanese. They knew that the Taiwanese liked Yiwu’s tea, and they had seen that it was the Taiwanese who had initially boosted the tea economy in Yiwu. Even the wife of Mr. Zheng, a woman of more than sixty years old who usually only cared about the family business, often said to me, “thank the Taiwan people. Without them, we could not imagine what Yiwu would be like today.”

**Figure 5.18:** A local used a purple clay pot.

**Figure 5.19:** A local used a shared jug.

In Yiwu during the autumn of 2007 I met Lü Lizhen, who led the Taiwanese team to Yiwu in 1994. He had maintained business connections with the locals. He confirmed many of the influences of the Taiwanese traders on Yiwu’s Puer tea, but he said the price difference between forest and terrace tea had gone far beyond his expectation. When explaining these issues, Lü was sitting in the family home of Mr. Zheng. He decided to brew two very precious kinds of aged Puer tea for us. He wanted to show us what really good Puer tea is. He took out his own zishahu (紫砂壺), a purple clay pottery pot and small tea bowls from soft cloth bags, which he always carried with him. One tea was the first batch of 7572, made in 1975 in the Menghai Tea Factory, with light artificial fermentation (recipe initially applied in 1975; using the seventh grade of tea material as the dominant ingredient; 2 was the code for the Menghai Tea Factory); the
other tea was *Hongyin* (Red Seal, see Figure 1.3), made in the 1950s also at the Menghai Tea Factory and naturally fermented. When these two kinds of Puer tea were first produced, Yiwu served as the supplier of tea material for Menghai. And it was acknowledged popularly that the dominant tea material in *Hongyin* was from Yiwu, and the first batch of 7572 was made of mixed origins of materials. Both teas had been stored in Hong Kong for most of their life and later on traded to Taiwan.

Obviously they were very different from the raw Puer tea produced in Yiwu nowadays. The first batch of 7572 was artificially fermented, though lightly, in Menghai, which made it different from the naturally fermented kind. *Hongyin*, although naturally fermented, was about 50 years old, and therefore different from the raw Puer tea of Yiwu that Mr. Zheng and his son tasted everyday in their tea business. The unique herbal medicine smell that resulted from Hong Kong storage could be sensed at once. They were also very different from the artificially fermented Puer tea stored in Yunnan that was much more “earthy.” According to some people I met, the smell of tea stored in Hong Kong was moldy because of its moist climate, but it was different from the moldy smell that resulted from storage in the moist weather of Yunnan including that of Yiwu. And when swallowing *Hongyin*, I further felt that it was like having *mi tang* (米汤), soup that had been boiled with rice, a term often used to describe good aged Puer tea. Both brews were strong and bright red (*hong nong ming liang*, 红浓明亮), a term used in guidebooks to describe aged Puer tea (see for example Deng Shihai 2004; Zhang Yingpei 2007; Zhou Hongjie 2004), in contrast to the faint yellow raw Puer tea that both I and Mr. Zheng’s family regularly drank (Figure 5.20, 5.21).

There were four tasters: Mr. Lü, Mr. Zheng, Mr. Zheng’s son Zheng Da, and me. Mr. Zheng and Zheng Da tasted slowly and carefully. They praised the beautiful color of the tea brew but they didn’t give any clear comments on the taste. Mrs. Zheng was sitting beside us watching. Like many women in Yiwu, she did all sorts of work like cooking and cleaning for the whole family to back up Mr. Zheng and Zheng Da’s tea business, but she didn’t like drinking tea. Her digestion was not good, which she gave as one excuse not to drink tea. And it was in the evening when Lü served the tea, so she was afraid this would make it hard for her to sleep. But Mr. Lü strongly invited her to have a few small bowls. He told her that good quality aged Puer tea would benefit her digestion and would not disrupt her sleep. Mrs. Zheng tried some, but she didn’t give any significant comment, either, and after two small tea bowls she stopped.
Figure 5.20: Mr. Lű (right) was about to make tea at Mr. Zheng’s house.

Figure 5.21: Hongyin infused by Mr. Lű (right) and raw Puer that was regularly drunk by the Zheng family (left).
I asked Mr. Lū why he came to Yiwu for tea almost every year. He answered directly that was because highly desirable aged Puer tea like Tongqing, Songpin (the two I tasted in Hong Kong and mentioned in chapter 1), or Tongxing and Tongchang, the so called first generation of Puer tea, all originated in Yiwu. He had tasted examples of almost all of these that were at least 60 or 70 years old, and he was strongly hoping that the new ones he was now collecting in Yiwu would turn out as good ones after some decades. The first batch of 7572 and Hongyin, products of the second generation, also represent the aged appeal of Puer tea, although they are younger. Mr. Lū said that one piece of Hongyin could be sold for 8,5000 RMB, but before the Puer tea market boomed he sold it to his customers for only several thousand RMB. Very generously he broke some pieces from his 7572 and Hongyin and left them with Mr. Zheng’s family for further tasting.

A few days later I went to Mr. Zheng’s house again. The two samples of precious aged tea left by Mr. Lū were untouched. I asked Mr. Zheng about his thoughts on the earlier tasting. Mr. Zheng shook his head. He had little interest in that kind of Puer tea. It was full of an aged smell. He actually preferred the raw kind he was producing and tasting everyday in Yiwu. It was full of fresh aroma. As far as his own taste was concerned, he did not really care that his clients were strongly counting upon the transformation from the fresh into the aged.

The two preferences of Mr. Zheng and Mr. Lū stand for the two poles of taste preferences for Puer tea: on the one hand raw Puer, the freshly produced Puer tea with little fermentation; and on the other hand, the aged Puer that had been naturally fermented for over fifty years. Nowadays, the aged Puer tea originating in Yiwu could be found in Hong Kong and Taiwan but not in Yiwu itself. Again many local people felt remorse about this situation, and in self-mockery they declared that “people producing Puer tea don’t store Puer tea.” The fact was that the value of aged Puer tea was launched and propagated by people in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Once the gate of mainland China was opened after the Reform and Opening Up, this aged value was conveyed back to the production area. The locals in tea production areas like Yiwu, however, had persisted in drinking fresh rather than aged tea. Whether being guided to prefer forest tea, being taught the proper way to prepare Puer tea, or being taught how to delicately drink tea, Yiwu people had learned many new rules from the Taiwanese. But when it came to choose between raw Puer and aged Puer, many Yiwu people still preferred the
former, depending on their plain palate shaped by their daily life and cultivated by the local water and soil (shuitu, 水土) of Yiwu.

Zheng Da, Mr. Zheng’s son, however, had more interest than his father in exotic things. He tasted the aged tea again some days later with his friends. Like his father, he had got used to the fresh tea of Yiwu and didn’t praise Mr. Lū’s tea. But, at the same time, he was trying his best to get nearer to this aged tea, and as time went by I found he was more and more appreciative of it. His father, although being more loyal to his original palate, recognized that, in terms of commercial profit, he had to keep up with the ongoing preference for aged tea. Though the market recession had brought him many uncertainties, he had seen one certainty in the continuing demand of Mr. Lū and others for raw Puer that would one day turn into aged tea. In the product description he attached to his family-made Puer tea, he wrote clearly that Puer tea was yue chen yue xiang, the longer the storage, the higher the value.

In July 2009 I went to Taiwan for a short trip, and one day drank Puer tea with several young friends who had never been to Yunnan. When they heard that the people in production regions like Yiwu previously didn’t drink aged Puer tea, they burst out laughing. From their very first experience of Puer tea, they had been informed that Puer tea shouldn’t be drunk until it was aged. They had become accustomed to this law. Their laughing showed that they took aging as a natural and intrinsic feature of Puer tea. They even didn’t spare a thought for the diachronic sequence, that it was fresh tea rather than aged tea that was closer to the original nature of Puer tea, at least for people in the production regions.

The people in Yiwu personally experienced this transformation in taste. In terms of commercial profit, they were remorseful about their “ignorant” behavior in the past and had to keep up with the ongoing market preference for aged tea. This, then, challenged their original palate, the appreciation for fresh Puer tea. It brought about complex and conflicted feelings when consuming Puer tea, and it urged them to be open to the possibility of updating their old habitus. But, of course, this could not be changed in one or two days.
Conclusion: Reflective Worries

In the jianghu world of Puer tea, there are no fixed rules. In Farquhar’s understanding, Bourdieu’s habitus is open to the influence of history. Likewise, the criteria about Puer tea’s value has changed back and forth in Yiwu in the past half a century. This chapter depicts the contrast between the nationalized and Maoist period on the one hand and the partially privatized and Reform and Opening-up era on the other. Specifically I have focused on four main changes, namely the relationship between food production and tea production, the contrast in cultivation between forest and terrace tea, the changes in tea price, and the consumption choice between the raw and the aged taste. These illustrate how the changing criteria applied to Puer tea, guided by governmental policy and market demand, had aroused remorseful feelings for the locals, and how these worries had deepened when these historical changes were recalled and related to the ongoing fall in the tea market.

The stories of remorse and the constant changes in Yiwu epitomize other wider stories with a similar theme that were being lived by urban traders and consumers, especially those from Yunnan. According to the current value standards on Puer tea, the ways that Yunnanese treated Puer tea prior its bloom in the mid 1990s were all “ignorant.” In popular books and magazines, and also during my own fieldwork, I saw numerous people exclaim that they should have stored tons of aged Puer tea, made from forest tea material, much earlier. This regret, in turn, encouraged blind buying and storing, but much of this resulted in bankruptcy when the market suddenly receded.

Paralleling urban remorse, this chapter is filled with rural voices. For these people, tea has long been the mainstay of local livelihoods and hence is also a focus for local anxiety and happiness. The question raised by Mr. Guan about the tea price, which I discussed at the beginning of the chapter, reflected the local uncertainty aroused by ongoing events as well as by the historical past. Just as in Chinese medicine, which is metaphorically drawn on by Judith Farquhar, the present repletion of the individual or the national body is not simply a phenomenon of repletion, but it can be diagnosed in terms of the past depletion. Driven by constant changes, there may never be a clear answer about the stable authentic features of Puer tea. Rather, these features are a response to context and to history. On the one hand, the uncertainty of the locals shows their inability to control and adjust the value of tea. On the other hand, however, while being connected to the broader historical context, their worries are not just incurable
worries, but have contained forces of transformation. That is, the external pressures and acquired standards can be used as a kind of weapon by the locals to partially resolve their worries when the tea business turned cold in the autumn of 2007. I turn to this in the following chapter.
Chapter 6 Transformed Qualities

The longer Puer tea is aged, the mellower and smoother its taste will be. And finally it will attain hua [a full transformation]...It will melt in your mouth once you drink it. This is the supreme praise for the best quality Puer tea (Deng Shihai 2004: 49).

The Power of Transformation

When I finished my spring fieldwork in Yiwu at the end of May 2007, I asked to store a box of clothes and other goods at the local guesthouse. When I came back in mid-September my stored possessions had spent most of the wet season here. Although I had sealed it well, a strong moldy smell came out when the box was opened. This showed that Yiwu’s wet season was really moist, with rain on most days. I began to worry about the Puer tea that had been stored in Yiwu after being processed during the spring.

My worries were partly confirmed in the following days when I drank Puer tea with local families. Some tea had the same moldy smell as my stored possessions. The most obvious changes occurred with the loose-leaf tea. This tea was often kept in a ventilated place, where it had greater exposure to the very moist air in the wet season. As a result natural fermentation was accelerated. The result was more pleasing if the tea had been put in a mostly sealed room. When tea was stored for around two years in such conditions, the tea brew had turned from light yellow into orange (Figure 6.1), with a special plum aroma. But if it had been exposed to the moist air for the same period of time, the tea brew had turned to dark red (Figure 6.2), with an obvious moldy smell.

The tea traders from urban areas usually appreciated the “plum” rather than the “moldy” smell. But as far as local people were concerned, if focused on the color change rather than the smell preference, they were quite happy about the accelerated changes, from a commercial point of view. In their opinions, this proved that Yiwu was a good storage place to age Puer tea quickly according to the principle of “the older the better.” And they thought the changes showed that the tea brew was developing from light yellow

---

1 Like most areas of Xishuangbanna and nearby Southeast Asia, Yiwu has dry and wet seasons. The dry season lasts from October to May, and the balance of the year is the wet season. The annual rainfall of Yiwu is about 1500 to 1900 millimeters, and the wet season accounts for 80 percent of the annual rainfall (EBMCA1994: 55; Zhao Rubi 2006: 4).
towards *hong nong ming liang* (红浓明亮, strong and bright red), a criterion which was only applied to high quality aged Puer teas as described in popular books.

**Figure 6.1:** Two-year-old raw Puer tea (left) and newly produced Puer tea (right), both stored in Yiwu.

**Figure 6.2:** Raw Puer tea stored in ventilated conditions in Yiwu, also around two years old.
From the traders of Taiwan and the Pearl River Delta, Yiwu people were learning to appreciate aged Puer tea. Although this appreciation may not have been consistent with their original palates, “aged” had become a handy tool. Traders began to invest in Puer tea when the market was hot, as it was believed that Puer tea would accumulate value during its aging, and they didn’t need to worry about selling it as quickly as green tea. When the Puer tea market cooled in autumn 2007, storage also became a useful weapon for locals to help resolve their worries. From a recent perspective, the worries were caused by the unexpected rise and fall of the Puer tea market in 2007; from a historical perspective, the worries were rooted in the past experience that showed that the value of Puer tea was determined either by changeable tea policy or shifting consumption demand. Moreover, the locals were also under pressure from the new government regulations on tea production, namely the QS standard. In general, what the local tea producers faced was uncertainty: whether or not to continue with tea production, and in what way to continue it.

This chapter is about how local people dealt with the challenges when the Puer tea market went into recession, how they applied strategies to continue their Puer tea business by confronting various pressures, and how they looked at the main problems of Puer tea differently from those in urban areas. In particular, it is about how the newly developed criteria on the value of Puer tea are transformed by them into local practices, and hence the characteristics of Puer tea itself are endowed with new “qualities.”

Practice theory stresses the role of human agency and the importance of interaction between multiple actors. Giddens (1979: 145) refers to “the dialectic of control” to argue that those being controlled have potential power to counteract their supervisors. James Scott (1985) refers to “hidden transcripts” to express a similar idea. In contrast with an earlier focus on peasants’ uprisings and revolutions, he underlines the importance of everyday forms of indirect resistance, which he refers to as a “constant struggle” and “subtle sabotage” (Scott 1985: 29, 31). He notes that this everyday social action exists with no institutional visibility, no manifestoes and no banner, but the final impacts of the action can be very significant. He describes these local forms of expression in these terms:

They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation
with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does “between revolts” to defend its interests as best it can (Scott 1985: 29).

Following these ideas, I want to further argue that one aspect of understanding such subtle resistance is to look at how locals explore the margins, which are beyond the definition of existing regulations. That is, by blurring the boundary between their newly explored ground and the already established rules, they can successfully transform the established authenticity into a localized one. Although the attitudes and actions of the peasants in my case are very much like those described by Scott, I feel the word “resistance” is too rigid in terms of this particular cultural context, and too dualistic. In the case of Puer tea, there are multiple actors with multiple perspectives. “Transformation” would be a better description. The corresponding word in Chinese is hua (化), which encapsulated neither direct opposition nor absolute weakening but gradual change. The word carries the meaning of “melting” and aiming to reach a neutralized state.

The concept of hua has long been utilized by Chinese traditional philosophy to refer to ubiquitous transformation, exemplified by the famous discourse of Daoism on the mutual transformation between bad and good fortune: “It is upon bad fortune that good fortune leans, upon good fortune that bad fortune rests” (Lao Tzu and Waley 1998, Chapter 58: 122-123). And when it is put into the term wenhua (文化, culture) or other – hua forms (for instance, jiaohua, 教化, moralize, domesticate or civilize) in terms of Confucianism, it means to transform something raw or rough, through gradual instruction, education or domestication, into something civilized and superior.2

In Puer tea’s case, hua is often used in the term chenhua (陈化) to mean “aging” or “fermentation” in storage, the process by which the astringent feature of raw Puer tea is transformed into a mild, smooth condition. As I have shown, this can be long-term natural aging or short-time artificial fermentation.

In the jianghu context, hua intrinsically indicates the strategies and settlements employed by multiple actors to transform an unsatisfying situation into a comparatively

---

2 See The Analects (Book thirteen): “…Jan Ch’iu said, When the people have multiplied, what next should be done for them? The Master said, Enrich them. Jan Ch’iu said, When one has enriched them, what next should be done for them? The Master said, Instruct them” (Confucius and Waley 1997: 162-163).
more satisfying one. For instance, as I’ve mentioned before, the knights-errant depend upon their own martial arts rather than the state regulation to help the poor and deal with unfair issues; or they withdraw from jianghu and become a hermit to avoid conflict with the state or other jianghu groups; or some of them finally find proper ways to resolve disputes between different disciplines and to reach a harmonious relationship. This last approach is called hua gange wei yubo (化干戈为玉帛, turn hostility into friendship).

The above meanings of hua shed light on my interpretation of how the local people of Yiwu actively appropriated the authenticity of Puer tea. Specifically, I focus on one aspect of the meaning of hua, namely the transformation from something hard and unacceptable to something applicable and digestible. This transformation and appropriation took place in the context of Puer tea lacking detailed criterion by which its quality could be judged, and it also lacked efficient government supervision. These deficiencies in the definition and regulation of Puer tea are what I call “margins,” and it was these margins that were fully explored by the locals with their transforming agency.

People in Yiwu often complained that they didn’t know how to properly judge the authentic quality of Puer tea. Some felt that the government should have found efficient ways to prevent the intrusion of unauthentic tea material from outside Yiwu. For instance, when worries and uncertainties were aroused because of the market recession, one man expressed to me his disappointment about the local government:

There are 30 people working in our township agricultural station. I really can’t understand why there needs to be so many people. I don’t see any efficiency in their work. Why couldn’t they actively come to help us peasants with calculating on an abacus, for example, to plan what to plant and how to increase income. But they could provide nothing useful but just sit in the office enjoying their leisure.

It was true that in both urban and rural areas there were strong calls for clearer and more powerful regulations. But before this happened, the “self-help” of the local peasants flourished.

The other background to such “self-help” was that even though the Puer tea market was in recession, the Quality Safety (QS) certification system was still applying pressure.
The original purpose of QS was to make sure that the tea production process was clean enough, but in actuality it resulted in the unavoidable expansion of the production spaces that needed high investment. Under these investment circumstances, redefining and transforming the authenticity of Puer tea was practiced by the locals not only as a form of symbolic representation, but also as an important pragmatic tool. Yiwu’s tea producers avoided direct resistance to the external pressures, but their actions fundamentally helped with dealing with worries at a crucial moment, and they empowered the locals to achieve a certain degree of freedom.

In this chapter I’ll provide four case studies to illustrate these local practices. Whereas the last chapter focuses mainly on the external impacts on the development of Yiwu’s Puer tea, this chapter illustrates a more optimistic landscape by digging out the dynamic role of the locals.

“Walking on Two Legs”

(Watch Film 6 on DVD 2 before or after reading this section [ ]). Mr. He has been mentioned twice before. In Chapter 2, I showed how his family tea production was challenged by the new QS standard. During the spring of 2007 he started to build a new tea factory, in cooperation with a capable tea company in Kunming, instead of making any changes to his old house. In Chapter 5, I described how he had re-established his rice fields when the Puer tea business tuned cold.

Mr. He had finished constructing his new tea factory by the time the autumn of 2007 arrived. If things had happened in accordance with his original plan, he would have definitely been collecting more basic tea material and processing it with the greater production capacity of his new factory. But, the collapse of the Puer tea market happened just after Mr. He had spent almost 600,000 RMB on building his new production space. Furthermore, like many other locals, he had made a high investment in buying highly sought after tea material during the spring season when the price was booming.

When I visited him in autumn, he expressed his deep frustration to me and said that this was really an unfortunate year for him. Nevertheless, while complaining, he kept on working hard. One day in late September, he got up early in the morning, and then hurried his son and several workers out to the new factory. It was the first day that his
new factory would start testing. Only if the test went well, could they pass the QS successfully. The new factory was two kilometers away from his house in central Yiwu. It was made of reinforced concrete. Its area was more than five times than that of the family house. Surrounding a rectangular open courtyard there were a number of separate rooms, marked as “tea material storing room,” “tea material sorting room,” “dressing and cleaning room,” “tea pressing room,” “tea drying room,” “finished product room,” “tea laboratory,” “tea tasting room,” and “factory office.”

There were two tea pressing rooms. In one room of more than twenty square meters, He San, Mr. He’s son, acted as the core link in the production chain. He San hand-shaped the tea cake, the most difficult and significant procedure that directly determined how the final tea cake would look. To his left, his fiancée Little Zhang, was teaching a new employee how to put the correct amount of raw material into a cylindrical container and weigh it. She used to work in a government office in Jinghong, but had quit that job and was concentrating on helping with the He family’s tea business. I was told that she was asked by He’s family to help them, otherwise she would not be accepted as a daughter-in-law. On the right side of He San, two young men were stepping upon the grindstones to press the caked tea. Here, the traditional way of handcrafting caked Puer tea was continuing.

Next to this was the other processing room which hadn’t started operations. A large new machine was bought and carried in from outside several days previously. It would be used to press the caked tea mechanically, as an alternative to the grindstones, but Mr. He and his family were still waiting to learn how to use it. This machine, I was told, was a necessary part of the QS standard. I was told that it would be mainly used when producing gift tea (li pin cha, 礼品茶), which referred to those Puer teas that would be used at special events for gift giving. Gift tea was taken by some people, though not all, as being made of poorer quality tea material, but demand for it could be high during special seasons such as the Chinese New Year and the Mid Autumn Festival, when Puer tea was given as a gift in urban regions. According to this line of thinking, the He family’s production choice hinted that better quality tea material should be paired with the traditional method, the grindstone, while the poorer quality material was left to the machine, which could increase the production output. But obviously the machine made the new factory really modern, in contrast to the grindstones in the nearby room, and to all the other processing equipment under the roof of the family house in central Yiwu.
Mr. He walked around supervising all the work, and dealt with all kind of trivial but important things for the initial work in the new factory. He had a very complex and paradoxical feeling about this modern space. To a great extent he didn’t like it. He complained that it forced him to spend a large amount of extra money. But at the same time he was very proud of his new construction. He took a group of guests from Beijing on an active and detailed tour of the factory and he hinted to them that so far this was the best tea production unit in Yiwu. The guests were curious about the “tea laboratory,” where there were some professional evaluation tea cups, test tubes, and an accurate scale, which were usually found only in chemical laboratories or at special meetings for tea evaluation. Mr. He’s answer hinted that this equipment might not be used in practice but was only required by QS.

The new factory also included accommodation for the employees and a kitchen. But due to some unfinished work, for the first few days of operation, all the workers had to go back and forth to the old family house in central Yiwu. At home, Mrs. He and her daughter, Hongping, cooked lunch and dinner for the workers. Mrs. He was worried about the cooking. She needed to look after the family house, but in future she might need to go to the new factory to cook, otherwise they would have to spend extra money to employ another cook. Hongping ran a tea shop in Kunming, and came back home temporarily to help with the housework as well as factory management. In her own words, the initial test for the new factory was “a big thing” and these early operating days were “a crucial moment” for the He family. As I learnt later, the He family received some orders this autumn, though general business was still cold. They worked hard to retrieve some losses and, of course, to see how the new factory worked. The actual inspection and evaluation would take place soon.

Staying with them throughout the day at both the factory and at home, I could feel the tension of the tea business for the whole family. Even during lunch and dinner, Mr. He and Hongping didn’t forget to remind the new employees about the operating details in the new factory. After lunch and a short break, Mr. He urged He San and all the other workers to go to the factory again. He San drove a car and took all the workers first. Mr. He usually went there on foot shortly after he finished some other things at home. It was not until after dinner that he could sit down at home and enjoy smoking his bamboo pipe. He liked to sit and smoke in his quadrangle courtyard, where the ground was paved with flagstones and whose structures were all made of wood: wooden pillars,
wooden windows, and wooden stairways. The courtyard and one connecting used to be the area for tea processing. The kitchen, the bathroom, the living room, the dining room, and the bedrooms were all nearby on the ground floor. In Mr. He’s words, “all things were arranged simply, handily and traditionally.” The upper level was used for tea packing and storing. The upstairs windows provided a view of the tea fields on the opposite mountain. While smoking his pipe, Mr. He explained to me how he had realized the important value of this old space:

There have been many times when travelers entered my house without invitation. And usually in the end tea business could be done. I have been wondering about why this could happen. As you know, there are many families selling tea in Yiwu, but in some people’s eyes I am more successful. I think it is largely due to my aged house. If I leave my door open, people passing by easily notice that there is something special inside. They are curious about my house and, of course, about our making Puer tea in the handcrafted way. Yes, the new factory is excellent, but I know that not many visitors will naturally go there. Therefore I insist that there should be at least one of my family members left looking after the old house.

Mr. He’s family house was more than 70 years old and it had been used for processing Puer tea for three years before the new factory was built. It was on the government list of Yiwu’s protected architecture. Realizing the value of the aged house, Mr. He decided that he would keep both spaces for tea processing. The new factory would acquire QS certification soon, and in Mr. He’s logic, this certification could be extended to cover his house, at least for demonstrating the “traditional” way of tea processing. QS regulations strictly defined how to format the modern processing space in order to have clean production and safe consumption, but it didn’t declare that the traditional space must be abandoned for tea processing. By making use of this regulatory margin, Mr. He wanted to keep hold of two things at the same time: the modern and the traditional. In his own words, this was to “walk on two legs.” However hard it was for him to go back and forth between the two places, he persisted in doing so everyday. Later on he managed to make his multiple journeys easier by learning how to drive a car, despite the fact that he was over sixty years old. Moving with modern transport rather than on foot, the distance between the modern and the traditional was seemingly shortened. And using a flexible logic, he successfully integrated his modern and traditional production
spaces. As a result, the Puer tea processed by his family, whether in the modern factory or in the old family house, both would be marked with QS certification on the wrapping paper, along with the indispensable characters: *chuantong jiating shougong zhizu* (传统家庭手工制作, traditional family and hand-made).

“Wait-and-see” and the “Blank Version”

Mr. He’s new tea factory passed QS in October 2007. At that time, according to official data, there were around 50 Yiwu families who had achieved QS for their fine production. But it was well known that there were actually far more than 50 families who were involved in fine production, perhaps as many as 80. Among the extra units, some were still struggling to construct a new production space in order to get a QS certificate, while some others never planned to do so. According to those in the latter category, QS was not a serious issue and they could still continue fine production in their own way. Hu Ba was one such a case. He was the tea producer I mentioned in the last chapter, who had a stable business contract with a Korean “sworn mother.”

Hu Ba didn’t have an aged and attractive house like Mr. He, but clients went to his door due to the fame of his excellent forest tea resources. He processed his own tea material in his family house, for both rough and fine production. He didn’t need to worry about an outlet for his tea even after the Puer tea market problems. He said he had no ambition to run a large-scale tea business, but would just base his business on his present tea resources and sell them to stable clients. According to him, and some others in a similar situation, QS meant making a large investment, which was not worth doing for just small-scale production. The strategy Hu Ba adopted was simple and practical: he only worked when the officials were not coming for inspection. Such unregulated moments, according to his experience, were abundant. He felt more confident when autumn came, as QS officials seldom came after the Puer tea recession. He congratulated himself when witnessing the losses incurred by some other families who had been working hard on expanding their production facilities. Most importantly, he had stable clients who accepted tea products without a QS certificate. The Korean “sworn mother” was his number one client. Rather than making changes in fine production to reach QS, which was only a provincial standard, Hu Ba’s family made changes in rough production as requested by this stable client from overseas. His wife Zou told me about their client’s requests:
She said that QS doesn’t matter, but she reiterated that we must avoid using any pesticide or fertilizer on the tea plant. She declared that she would have a chemical examination done on the tea that we sold to her. If any index was above the standard mark, she would reject our goods, because she would have trouble exporting them to Korea. And of course she asked us to harvest, process and pack forest tea and terrace tea separately. She was a skilled tea taster, you know. She also asked us to sun-dry the tea leaves rather than toasting them with fire or a machine. So you see, during continuously rainy days, I would give up harvesting and just let the tea grow. Moreover, she asked us not to trim the tea trees in winter, or the plants would bloom too fast in the coming spring, which would reduce their quality.

Hu Ba’s family accepted all of these rules even though they were much stricter than the government’s suggested standards on rough production. Throughout 2007, most of their tea products were sold to the Korean trader at the market price. Encouraged by this success, Hu Ba began increasing tea cultivation, as the Korean woman said that newly planted terrace tea would be acceptable if pesticide and fertilizer was not used. This meant that his production scale could be doubled in the near future. When the topic touched upon QS, Hu Ba’s attitude was “wait-and-see.” He wasn’t sure about his future production mode but he could proudly declare that he was producing very authentic Yiwu tea.

One day I entered the house of a woman who lived not far from Hu Ba’s family. Actually, they were relatives. Neither of them had the QS certificate, but Hu Ba’s family brand was obviously more famous. Nevertheless, the woman insisted that her tea was no worse than Hu Ba’s. She showed me one piece of her own tea wrapped with simple white paper, without any characters or images (Figure 6.3). The woman explained that she didn't want to spend extra money on printing colorful wrapping paper. The white paper, she said, was referred to by some people as bai ban (白版), literally blank version. She stressed that the blank version of Puer tea without any QS mark, was specifically requested by some special clients, because it represented very authentic Puer tea produced by a small-scale family business. Tea products with QS, on the other hand, were seen by some people as something ugly and inauthentic, representing larger-scale production that focused on quantity rather than quality. I also understood that
some outside traders specifically ordered these blank versions so they could re-wrap it with their own brand’s wrapping paper later.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 6.3:** The “Blank Version” of Puer Tea.

This woman’s family was one of the 23 families in central Yiwu that I surveyed in October 2007 (see chapter 5). My original survey purpose was to get some quantitative data to see the change in cultivation mode after Puer tea’s bloom. After kindly answering my survey questions, these interviewees often actively raised some interesting issues that lay beyond my proposed questions. Quite often they asked for my opinions on the future prospects of Puer tea and on what was happening in the urban market. And almost everyone actively and sharply criticized the heavy intrusion of outside tea material, which was taken to be the root cause of local worries. According to them, it was concern about inauthentic tea that finally resulted in the collapse of the whole Puer tea market, and because of this blemished fame, fewer visitors would come to Yiwu or buy Puer tea. In local analysis, the increasing intrusion of non-Yiwu tea material was related to the operation of QS. Their logic went like this: QS demanded a high investment to enlarge the fine production area. Once families had made this investment, they must try various ways to collect enough tea material to cater for their enlarged production scale and, of course, to recoup the QS expenses with higher quantity production. However, as everyone knew, the limited tea resources in Yiwu
could not match the increase in fine production or the increased number of tea traders. As a result, one solution was to get cheaper tea resources from outside Yiwu, but to mark the finished product as “authentic Yiwu Puer tea” along with a QS certificate on their paper wrapping.

These were different voices from the urban areas on the causes of Puer tea’s recession. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the urban discussions were more focused on the “packaging” level, whether or not Puer tea had been subject to over speculation, or it whether or not it had been promoted well enough. The rural voices, however, were more pragmatically oriented towards the tea material itself, the substantial content of the packaging. For urban people the actual content was important but it was seemingly a secondary element.

Located between government regulations and specific market demands, the local producers must make a careful choice. The QS standard demanded “addition,” that is to add facilities and to enlarge the production scale. By contrast, what some traders requested was “subtraction,” which was to reduce undesirable work on tea cultivation, to keep small rather than large processing units, and sometimes even to leave the wrapping “blank.” People like Hu Ba and his relative didn’t follow the government regulations. Nor did they oppose it openly. They indicated that “addition,” the larger-scale production with QS approval, actually produced inauthentic Puer tea. At the same time, in tacit agreement with their clients, they legitimized their work without QS, that is, “subtraction,” as the authentic way.

The QS request could also be read as “tunnel vision,” as proposed by James Scott (1998: 13), namely a radical simplification managed by the government to help impose taxation and to mold monoculture. In Yiwu Puer tea’s case it also stood for standardization and mechanization. This simplification, then, was deconstructed by the locals like Hu Ba and his relatives with flexible strategies. The standardization came up against the attitude of “wait-and-see;” and the mechanization was counteracted by more complex hand work in tea refining, as requested by their clients who needed specialty goods. So by blurring the boundary between regulation and practice, they readjusted the simplification and turned it back into complexity. It is not only that, in Scott’s (1998: 48) terms, “what was simplifying to an official was mystifying to most cultivators,” but also
what was complexified by the locals was mystifying to the officials, or, at least, hard for
them to judge or regulate.

Whether adopting “subtraction” rather than “addition,” or deconstructing simplification
and reconstructing complexity, these strategies were aimed at legitimizing the local
methods of production and trade. By transforming the standards from the authority into
a localized acknowledgement, they endowed their tea products with new and flexible
authenticity, and hence with transformed qualities, whereupon the worries and
uncertainty brought by the downfall of the tea market were partially neutralized.

“Tu Cha”: Indigenous Tea

Gao Fachang, a teacher at the local middle school, worried about something different.
To him, the number one issue was the damaged ecosystem of the tea mountains.

Before I visited Gao in person, I had seen a map of the Six Great Tea Mountains that he
had drawn hanging in many local houses. Local people liked this very much, and it had
become an almost indispensable item for families who were running Puer tea businesses.
Once an old man talked to me about the names of two places on the map: one was
Dingjiazhai (Ding village), and the other was Lao Dingjiazhai (Old Ding village).
“These two villages are quite different,” he told me:

The former is inhabited by Yao people, while the latter is Han. If someone
tells you that his tea material is from Dingjiazhai, you must make sure to
check which Ding village it actually is. It makes a difference. It’s absolutely
right that Gao put both names on the map. He is someone who knows our tea
regions very well.

Even though Yiwu has been written about a lot and there have been many maps
included in popular books, prior to Gao no one had been able to put such name
differentiation accurately into a map. But along with praise, people in Yiwu described
Gao as an odd man or a meddler who was overly critical and behaved quite
eccentrically.

When I met him, rather than being surprised by his short stature in contrast to his name
(Gao in Chinese means tall), I was more shocked by the price of his map: 40 RMB,
which would be enough to buy almost four good quality color maps in urban bookstores. Besides the location of the major tea resources, Gao’s map also showed the main transportation routes in the past and present, the locations of historical relics such as temples and stone tablets, and the longitude and latitude woven through all the Six Great Tea Mountains. This level of detail made me agree with his comment that this was not just a schematic illustration as appeared in other popular books about Puer tea, but it was an “integrative map,” which was the title he had given it. The longitude and latitude, the geographical locations, and the scale, I was told, were all surveyed and mapped by Gao himself. Without any advanced surveying instruments, all the data in the map was based upon his measurements on foot and local experience, conversion and calculation based on previous maps (he taught mathematics in the middle school), which took him a total of four years. And finally he had to find a way to publish it privately, because there were many difficult conditions set down by professional publishing units, which Gao could not meet. “That’s why it is expensive,” Gao said, “and you must come to me. You can’t get it at any bookstores” (Figure 6.4).

While looking at the map, he gave a critical territorial scoping on the places that “produce authentic Yiwu Puer tea”: “It’s not that any tea growing within this geographical boundary could be defined as authentic Yiwu tea. Tea trees planted mixed with rubber and below 1000 meters altitude, I think, should be excluded.” What he particularly referred to was a place called Nametian (纳么田), twenty minutes drive from central Yiwu (see Figure 2.11 ). In the early 1980s when terrace tea began developing, nine tea teams (cha dui, 茶队), actually nine large terrace tea fields, were established in Yiwu, with eight located around Nametian and one in central Yiwu. The same area in Nametian that had been used for tea plantation was later used for planting rubber, mixed with tea (Figure 6.5). Gao said,

You know, insect pests are fond of rubber, and pesticide must be applied. You can imagine how the tea planted along with the rubber would suffer. How could this tea share the general glory of the good tea of the Six Great Tea Mountains? Good quality tea should be on high mountains above 1000 meters, but Nametian’s tea and rubber fields are only at 700 or 800 meters. In my opinion, among the nine tea teams, only the terrace tea field in central Yiwu could be regarded as authentic.
Figure 6.4: Gao's map of the Six Great Tea Mountains, hung in a local house.

Figure 6.5: Tea (the lower bush form) is planted with rubber.
He then told me two stories relevant to the issue of damage to the ecosystem. I thought these stories might be typical of the events that created his image as being “odd” and “a meddler.” Once he witnessed the cutting of two old tea trees and reported the incident at once to the local Forestry Bureau. He did not receive any response, so he called the higher level of the Bureau. Still nothing was done. He was angry and he warned the forestry official that “if you don’t act, I’ll then have to take my own measures,” which implied that he might kill the tree-feller. Finally the officials were forced to come. In the other story, he wrote a letter to the central government in Beijing, telling how rubber fields were being increasingly planted in Xishuangbanna and that several local government officials were illegally involved in this. His letter received a positive response, which made him famous, though the local situation did not change much.

I asked why he viewed rubber as such a bad thing. He said it was based upon his own experiment. Once he took back a small portion of soil from a rubber plantation. When the wet season came, all the other soil in his field sprouted grass except the one area where he used the soil from the rubber plantation. He provided a comparison between rubber and tea:

Tea can coexist with other plants peacefully. But rubber is like a pump. It’s hard to find any other plants in the rubber forest. The earth used for rubber might become very dry and finally useless...The history of rubber planting in Xishuangbanna hasn’t surpassed one hundred years. We still don’t know what its negative impact will be, just like we still lack knowledge on aged Puer tea.

He said the area of tea, especially that of the forest tea, was hard to estimate. But since rubber was always planted in a large area, based upon his own measurements on foot, he dared to say that the present area of rubber in the Six Great Tea Mountains was no less than 500,000 acres. “Worst of all,” he said, “is that many local people could not help planting rubber after the Puer tea market went into recession. And they don’t even care that rubber should be planted below 1000 meters altitude. This will have a more negative impact on the tea trees.” To him, the downturn of the Puer tea trade was normal and may be temporary. Only if the tea trees were protected well would the Puer tea business bloom again. But once the ecosystem was destroyed, the prospects for Puer tea would be rather bleak. He thought it was not that people should not plant rubber at all, but the problem was that the rubber area was increasing too quickly.
Gao’s concern was sneered at by some locals as *qi ren you tian* (杞人忧天, groundless worries). Some thought his behavior was too radical. But the validity of his argument was also acknowledged by quite a few who liked listening to his stories. His concern was also echoed by some urban visitors, who helped with publishing his articles anonymously in some newspapers and websites. He also wrote a book about the history of Puer tea in the Six Great Tea Mountains. Publishing the book, however, encountered problems, just like his map. The main problem, according to the publisher in Kunming, was that Gao made too many criticisms of other tea experts and celebrities who had written about Puer tea, and this meant that the publisher would offend those people. Gao said he didn’t understand why he could not criticize those “experts,” and asked “shouldn’t the authentic history of Puer tea come out through debates?” Actually Gao was very proud of his own writing. Compared with other accounts of the Six Great Tea Mountains written by outsider traders, urban writers and government officials, he regarded his own as the most indigenous and therefore the most authentic. But after submitting his manuscript more than a year previously, Gao was still being repeatedly asked to make revisions. Besides being asked to limit his critiques, he was later on asked to revise his writing style and adopt a structure more suitable to a formal publication. Gao could not help but mock himself for being in such a situation: the more intrepidly he acted, the more his feet were bound.

Although bearing many concerns, Gao said he could still sleep well. He told me that he would not sleep well if he didn’t drink good Puer tea during the day. He mostly drank his own Puer tea. Gao ran a very small-scale tea business in Yiwu. He actually didn’t have his own production space, but did his fine production in the processing unit of a close friend. He collected tea material by himself. He put the exact tea material he liked into caked tea. He supervised the entire pressing process. He designed the wrapping paper of the final tea product. On his distinctive pack, the main color was earthy red. Characters and patterns were placed in concentric circles. What was most remarkable was the two characters in the central circle: *tu cha* (土茶), which could be read as “earthy tea” if literally translated, or “indigenous tea” if paraphrased. By using the word *tu* (earthy), he said he wanted to indicate that this piece of Puer tea was an indigenous product (*tu te chan*, 土特产); it was authentic but also common, not as magic as Puer tea was being propagated. In the outer circle it further clarified the meaning of *tu*: the origin of the tea material was from Xiangming, Yiwu’s neighboring township, which included four of the Six Great Tea Mountains (Manzhuan, Mangzhi, Gedeng, Youle) (see Figure
1.8). Gao was born in Xiangming, and he emphasized to me that he identified his ethnicity as *ben ren* (本人), the indigenous inhabitants of that area, rather than Yi, which was how they are identified by the government. He didn’t collect tea material in Yiwu much, as in his eyes Yiwu’s ecosystem had been destroyed. The front of the tea wrapping did not have any spare space for the “QS” mark, although the production unit of Gao’s friend actually had achieved this qualification. Like some other locals, Gao regarded his small-scale production as authentic and ignored QS. But unlike Hu Ba’s relative who ignored QS by presenting a “blank version,” Gao made a “full version” by filling all the corners of the wrapping paper to express his indigenous ideas. Despite confronting so much trouble and and so many restrictions, the self-designed Puer tea became the item on which Gao could freely perform his ideas about what was authentic Puer tea. What he didn’t forget to remind the customer was that the tea was “purely natural and organic,” and “the older the better” (Figure 6.6).

Compared with the tea producers discussed earlier in this chapter, Gao was more obviously inclined to resistance. He was opposed not only to the QS regulation, but also to the whole invasion of indigenous nature and culture by modern development. However, drawing lessons from his direct, intrepid but unacknowledged actions, he gradually turned to express his resistance via a relatively indirect channel, namely his own texts and images. When one channel was blocked, he always managed to find another through self-help, and to finally present his representations about the indigenous ecosystem, indigenous knowledge, indigenous mapping and indigenous tea making.
Figure 6.6: The tea wrapping designed by Gao. The contents of each circle from inside to outside are:
1. 土茶 (tu cha: earthy tea or indigenous tea).
2. Reading from upper left clockwise:
   - 喜庆象昌 (Xikong Xiangchang: Xikong is the hometown of Gao in Xiangming township; Xiangchang is Gao's tea brand);
   - 诚信质量 (chengxin zhiliang: quality with good faith);
   - 老树嫩尖 (lao shu neng jian: tender buds from aged tea trees);
   - 越陈越香 (yue chen yue xiang: the older the better).
3. Patterns.
4. Reading from 云南 (Yunnan) clockwise: 云南普洱茶原生地古六大茶山象昌四山纯天然大叶生态茶饼 (Yunnan Puer cha yuanshengdi gu Liu Da Cha Shan Xiangming si shan chuan tianran da ye shengtai cha bing: purely natural and organic Puer tea cake, produced with tea material from Xiangming that includes four of the Six Great Tea Mountains, the original tea growing place in Yunnan).

New Agent

It was mid-October 2007. Tea harvested in this season could enjoy good autumn sunshine in the drying process. But with good tea material, Mr. Zheng was worrying about the lack of customers. Over half of the outside traders and tourists, who visited Yiwu in the previous spring, didn't appear when autumn came. Luckily, one day he welcomed a small group of guests from Taiwan. Some of them came here with the purpose of finding a future business partner among the local families. I participated in their tea drinking and talking.

A few days earlier Mr. Zheng had collected some tea material from his ancestor's place, Zheng village, a sub village of Yiwu, about five kilometers from his present home in central Yiwu. He took some of this tea and made a brew for the guests because it was
readily at hand. Among all the tea areas in Yiwu, Zheng village was not distinctive. It wasn’t marked even on Gao’s map. Although it was not far from central Yiwu, few outsiders visited it as it was located on a ridge away from the main transport artery. Contrary to the expectation of Mr. Zheng, each one of the guests, who looked like very critical tea tasters, praised the tea very highly. One of the Taiwanese tea experts said that he liked the sunshine smell and the full taste of the paddy flower tea very much.\(^3\) When the Taiwanese guests asked to buy more of this tea, Mr. Zheng felt awkward as he had only collected less than two kilograms and it had not been pressed. Finally, faced with their enthusiastic requests, he sold all the tea material to them for a better price than usual. The guests had to leave in a few days. They suggested that caked Puer tea made of such good and pure material would be very much appreciated. This was a pleasant surprise to Mr. Zheng as the general tea business was still cold. And it also made him rethink the value of Puer tea made from pure material. Before this his tea products only had a general differentiation between forest tea and terrace tea. As for the detailed information about a piece of caked tea, for instance which exact mountain or village the tea material came from, he hadn’t been able to specify. Since Puer tea rebloomed in Yiwu he had learnt that some critical connoisseurs preferred Puer tea made of unmixed tea material with the exact origin specified. But all the locals knew that collecting and making completely separate batches of Puer tea was a big challenge and would make the fine production process much more difficult. And before this personal interaction with these Taiwan visitors, he had not really seen the value of separately processed tea material.

A few weeks later Mr. Zheng invited me to join another tea meeting. The meeting was at Zheng village, where he had lots of relatives. He chose to meet in the evening, which I later realized was the best time to meet because the local people were working during the day. I decided to video this tea meeting, but I hesitated about the poor evening light. Mr. Zheng reassured me, actively promising that he would bring some powerful light bulbs. I could see the he welcomed the chance to have the meeting recorded very much.

It was a meeting of almost 40 people, made up of many relatives and friends that Mr. Zheng had in that village. Mr. Zheng sat in the center, infusing Puer tea for people and

\(^3\) Tea harvested in autumn is also called paddy flower tea (gu hua cha, 谷花茶), because it comes out at the same time as the rice flowers in the paddy fields.
explaining the professional way of preparing tea that he had learnt from training class, books and outside traders. I had rarely seen Mr. Zheng place himself in the center of a crowd. Usually, at his own house he modestly listened to his guests who were obviously more talkative. But now at Zheng village it was Mr. Zheng, who now lived in central Yiwu, that took charge of the meeting and lectured to his hometown people, who had fewer chances for direct contact with the outside world.

First Mr. Zheng asked someone to read the preface of a book. It was a popular book about the Six Great Tea Mountains, recounting its past glorious history of Puer tea. By sharing the reading, Mr. Zheng reminded people to treasure the fame of Puer tea of the Six Great Tea Mountains. This reminded me of his answer to the question I once asked him: “why do you think there are so many people coming to trade Yiwu’s Puer tea?” He replied,

Different places produce different teas. Different people have different preferences. But Yiwu’s history and tea culture is unique. As you know, in the past even emperors appreciated our teas very much. This history is very attractive to present people. They would like to taste the same tea that had been used as tribute to the emperor.

He then told the audiences the story of how the Taiwanese guests appreciated the paddy flower tea material originating from Zheng village. This was the key information that he wanted to convey that evening. He also told them that some traders had entrusted him to collect more tea material from Zheng village. Through the entire storytelling, Mr. Zheng encouraged his relatives and friends to produce good quality tea material. He said, “Anyway we must live by our tea. I don’t think most of us could move to the cities one day.”

I could see that Mr. Zheng was cleverly combining two elements into his lecturing palette: cultural history and natural resources. These two elements had always been the mainstay for Yiwu people. They were somehow like the slogan about rice introduced by Chairman Mao: “you will not feel panic if you have rice in your hands.” What was perhaps different here was that these people, like Mr. Zheng, had already adopted the reality that they could obtain rice via tea. In this context the slogan could be transformed as: “you will not panic however much the market rises or falls, if you can maintain tea culture and tea nature.”
The audiences listened carefully, and were obviously greatly encouraged. One man argued that the obscurity of Zheng village’s tea was mainly due to the fact that the village name hadn’t been marked clearly on maps, including the one drawn by Gao. In response to the lecture, many villagers asked the participants, including Mr. Zheng and myself, to promote Zheng village’s tea to other outsiders.

One week later after this meeting, I saw more tea material from Zheng village being stored at Mr. Zheng’s house. The villagers had actively sent more of their material to Mr. Zheng’s door, or at least some samples. It couldn’t be more obvious that Mr. Zheng would continue his business even when the Puer tea market was in recession. Moreover, he was starting to make pure material Puer tea and mark the exact origin of the tea material on the wrapper of the caked Puer tea. I asked how he considered the future prospect for Puer tea. He said that actually he was very worried. But he thought that since any business would cause worries and since he had been in the Puer tea business for some years, he preferred to continue worrying about Puer tea rather than about rubber or something else. He said there were many uncertainties, but he believed that if the policy stayed stable, there was no war and people had enough to eat, there would be good reasons to continue his Puer tea business.

In the late 1990s, it was the Taiwanese who first acted as agents in promoting Yiwu’s Puer tea. This had fundamentally shaped the production mode and concept of Puer tea in Yiwu. In the following years, when Puer tea continued its prosperity, traders from multiple places had become involved, whether from Kunming or the Pearl River Delta, and some of them had played roles in complementing the rules for local tea production, especially those for rough production that was still not on the government’s agenda. Actually the agency of the locals had always co-existed with these external forces, otherwise the external forces could not have any impact. More importantly, these external impacts were transformed by local actors into their own practical strategies and were combined with indigenous interpretations. The role of the locals as active agents emerged more obviously when the Puer tea trade was in recession and the support from the government was very limited. The two tea meetings held by Mr. Zheng showed how he had acted as a good learner and instructor to fill in for absence of the government. Once he had been alerted up by the Taiwanese clients, he realized the value of Puer tea made from single-origin tea material, and took action immediately. And he cleverly sought out separate and authentic tea material by trying to build up pure and authentic
relationship with his tea material providers. His audiences reacted promptly, too, on being made aware of the new market by Mr. Zheng. As a result, a new item of authentic Puer tea was added to Mr. Zheng’s repertoire.

**Conclusion: Multiple Transformations**

The case studies in this chapter have shown how local people re-defined the authenticity of Puer tea flexibly and pragmatically. Mr. He’s strategy of “walking on two legs” was designed to cope with government regulation on the one hand, and to cater for urban consumers’ demand on the other. More importantly, the strategy was for his own practical survival. It was a self-created regulation, which reasonably manipulated and transformed the government’s rules. The strategy of Hu Ba and his relative was more like a guerrilla tactic. It was actually sneered at by people like Mr. He who had achieved the QS standard and who did not think it was a long-term solution. However, Hu Ba and his relative did manage to authenticate their own products without QS, and attempted to situate tea products with QS in an “inauthentic” position in public opinion. The debate about what is an authentic tea product was also joined by Gao, who encountered failure as well as success because of his strong persistence in identifying Puer tea with localized nature and culture. Mr. Zheng emphasized the importance of localization, too when he tutored his village relatives and friends. His commitment to localisation was awakened by external demand and utilized to balance the market recession.

In these cases, there was a general strategy of avoiding direct resistance to the government’s rules. Instead the strategy focused on exploring the margins of regulation and finding spaces where local voices could be re-legitimized. There was also the active appropriation of the authenticity of Yiwu’s Puer tea no matter how government regulation or market values changed. And also, outside forces, such as the Taiwanese influence, which had a major impact on transforming Yiwu’s nature and culture over the past ten years, were recontextualized and transformed into local pragmatic strategies. Although the difficulties couldn’t be solved completely, these multiple transformations did help with addressing some local concerns. Just as Daoism says “it’s upon bad fortune that good fortune leans,” these Puer tea actors in the production area were actively depending upon self-help to gradually transform the unsatisfying reality into a more pleasing situation.
Moreover, as part of the dynamics of transformation, one transformed quality is always destined for further transformation. For instance, "the longer the better," the borrowed strategy used by locals at the crucial moment to celebrate their storing of tea and to partially clear their worries about not being able to sell teas quickly, was soon challenged. As I witnessed, the moldy smell arising from the ventilated storing, began to give rise to new worries for some locals later on. Though they still believed that "the older the better" was generally true, they also gradually admitted that it could become "the older the worse" if the tea was not stored carefully. As a result, "retouching," new transformation, and re-defining began, whether it was stimulated by external preferences or by indigenous realization.
Winter

Figure 7.0: Puer tea stored in a Yiwu family house.
Chapter 7 Tea Tasting and Counter-Tea Tasting

…the other world isn’t so pure; the other law isn’t so perfect, either. A real Chinese knight-errant needs to retreat not only from the court but also from the jianghu, like the characters in [Jin Yong’s novel] Beyond the Rivers and Lakes: The Smiling, Proud Wanderer. (Chen Pingyuan 1997: 176)

*Interacted Space*

A tea tasting event with over 50 people was held in a Kunming tea house in November 2007 (watch Film 7 on DVD 1 before or reading this chapter □). Its purpose was to discuss the merits of whether Puer tea could be stored “the longer the better” and what kind of storage could produce good taste. *Sanzui*, one of the most influential tea websites in China,1 organized this meeting. It was the moment that the Puer tea market was in recession. In those days disputes about whether Puer tea depends upon the “long-lasting” factor had emerged frequently on the *Sanzui* website, turning this virtual space into a battlefield. Mr. Yan, who is in charge of the *Sanzui* web column on Puer tea, announced that “rather than disputing nonsense all day long, we should talk face to face by sharing and discerning the real aged Puer tea.” So, gathering in a public tea tasting space, people began to touch on an issue relevant to the time and space of tea storage.

Six kinds of Puer tea, aged from 6 to 19 years old, were served. There were three aged raw ones and three artificially fermented ones. They were selected from many samples contributed by web friends from various places such as Yunnan, Guangdong, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Anyone, as long as they were a member of *Sanzui*, could attend this tea tasting, but the precondition was that they must promise to write at least one hundred words of tea comment on the website afterwards. Being restricted by distance, most participants were from Yunnan, especially Kunming. Other members of *Sanzui* in other places such as Guangdong, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, could only share in the event via the web posts which provided live coverage of the tea meeting. Among the participants, experience or knowledge of Puer tea drinking was uneven. Some were senior, while some were just beginners. Their social background was mostly unknown. From their taste preferences, exemplified by the tea comments they gave later, it was

---

1 三緯齋: http://www.sanzui.com
obvious that many of them were endeavoring to achieve a better economic and cultural status through Puer tea investment and appreciation.

I began participating in this tea website after I got to know several key organizers of Sanzui, such as Mr. Yan, in Yiwu during the spring of 2007. At that time they were collecting all sorts of information on Puer tea and searching for the "authentic" tea material from the tea mountains. In the Sanzui circle, those who had been to the tea mountains were acknowledged as having more right to speak. A meeting for tea tasting, to some ordinary enthusiasts of Puer tea, was a good chance to meet tea experts and taste the tea recommended by them.

Rather than focusing on tea processing (pre-production that includes rough and fine production), this chapter and the next chapter focus primarily on Puer tea's post-production, namely its storage. In this chapter I examine the jianghu of Puer tea in the tea house. Just like the Chinese knights-errant wandering in jianghu, the organizers of this tea meeting had attempted to solve all disputes on Puer tea through organizing a singular event, counting upon personal tasting skills and trying to isolate tea tasting from other influences. This attempt failed, because one distinct interest met another, and counter forces kept on circulating between the different actors. It became inevitable that one's tasting judgment was affected very much by the whole tasting atmosphere and social interaction with other actors.

It has often been written in the anthropology and sociology of food that one's judgment on food taste is influenced by many exterior factors rather than relying on innate palate preference (see Messer 1984; Mintz 1985; Sutton 2001; Strasser 2003; Lien and Nerlich 2004). Case studies also show that the taste judgment often results from the mixed standards of one's internal preferences and external symbolic values; when the taster's prior value standard conforms with the symbolic meanings attached to the food, it tastes good, or vice versa (Allen, Gupta, and Monnier 2008). Food becomes something not only to eat, but also to think about. Generally, someone's distinct way of consuming food is actually his or her distinct way of self-representation (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990; Lupton 1996; Mintz 1996; Caplan 1997; Miller 1997; Gabaccia 1998; Counihan 1999; Counihan and Van Esterik 2008).

In Bourdieu's Distinction (1984), these different self-representations are often strongly influenced by different educational backgrounds and social origins; each group has their
unique social space and "cultural capital." What Bourdieu notes is strikingly true for the Puer tea event, in which different tea taste appreciations differentiate one person from another and act as signs of distinct cultural status. However, in Bourdieu's cases, there is a strong emphasis on the gap and distance between different groups of people. By using the Puer tea tasting event, I want to further look at distinction from the point of view of interaction rather than only from distance. When all actors' distinct self-representations are juxtaposed, not only their difference, separation and distance become apparent, but also the way that they relate, interact and deal with one another. That is, the way an individual constructs himself or herself is also the way that he or she joins in constructing social relations; and the standard that one uses for self-representation is based upon referring to others. As I'll show in relation to the tea tasting event, each group tried to show a unique way of identifying Puer tea by avoiding others' influence. Some participants even adopted retreat rather than direct competition, making the jianghu battle relatively still and secretive rather than open and violent. Nevertheless, the attitudes they took to separate themselves from the others clearly expressed the ways that they countered, related to and viewed each other.

On the one hand, under the guidance of tea experts at the Sanzui event, the people in the tea house paid attention to every detail of the tea infusing, drinking and identifying. This made the event look like a very formalized tea ritual and a collective activity. On the other hand, people's behavior in the tea house embodied their different social spaces and their varied interests in tea. And it is via focusing on the storage feature of the tea samples that their varied social spaces and interests met, contested and interacted. Consequently, it is the contested social relations that mostly determined their judgments about the tea taste and the influence of the tea's storage. In fact, identifying the tea's storage origin became less important than identifying an individual's social space inside and outside the tea house. Through such a tea event full of jianghu forces, counter forces and counter-counter forces, I argue that the interactional social spaces of human beings, rather than any personal techniques or innate palates, remain in Chinese society the core factor that shapes the authentic taste of things.

---

2 For other aspects of research that stresses that one's identity is constructed via relations with others, see Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), Notar (2006b).
Against Huyou

All through 2007 there had been numerous tea tasting events in Kunming. These events are called *chahui* (茶会), literally tea meeting, or *dou cha* (斗茶), meaning tea competition or tea game. They were organized by government or non-government tea associations (Figure 7.1, 7.3).

These *chahui* emerged under particular contexts. First, they become more common at the moment when Puer tea was extremely popular. Traders used these events to let more people know about their Puer products and collections; mass media outlets which started columns on Puer tea were eager to collect all sorts of material for publication; individual Puer tea enthusiasts were keen to meet and test their knowledge and tasting ability. Puer tea became something not only good to taste, but also important to know about. After the recession occurred in the summer of 2007, the passion for holding *chahui* was diminished but they still continued through the winter. The uncertain prospect of Puer tea made people worry and they were eager to discuss their concerns with others.3

Second, holding *chahui* was very much influenced by economic development in China. Things antique were despised during the planned economy period (1949-1978) and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). After the Reform and Opening Up (the late 1970s and the early 1980s), the trend was gradually changed. Activated by the economic upsurge since 1992, China had been developing towards modernity; people were celebrating new things. But, at the same time, the value of the ancient had been rediscovered. Tea, a national drink that had been ignored for fifty years, became a focus for attention once again. The popular *chahui* in Kunming was a kind of imitation and recovery of the ancient tea competitions and tea meetings, popular tea events in the Song Dynasty (967-1279) and also the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). These old events were portrayed in many poems, essays and paintings during these periods (Figure 7.2, 7.4).

---

3 But when I returned to Kunming in early 2009, *chahui* had become very infrequent as a result of the continuing recession in the Puer tea market.
Figure 7.1: Chaohui held in a tea restaurant in Kunming in 2007. Professional tea infusers wore ethnic costumes (top). The participants (bottom) answered questions on a piece of paper after the tasting.

Figure 7.2: Wen Hui Tu [Literati Meeting Painting] by Zhao Jie (Northern Song emperor, 1082-1135). Source: NPMW (2010).
Figure 7.3: Judging the quality of the tea cakes before tasting.

Figure 7.4: *Dou Cha Tu* [Tea Contest Painting] by Liu Songnian (Southern Song Dynasty, 1127-1279). Source: Yourart Website (2008).
Third, each organizer wanted to present a special way of tasting Puer tea, different from the others. Therefore the rivalry not only existed between participants in one chahui, but also between different chahui. The organizers of the Sanzui chahui were potentially competing against several “others.” They were against those traders who didn’t really love or know about Puer tea but were just good at advertising and cheating. They declared that they would provide the quintessence of Puer tea at their chahui to fully prove their supreme connoisseurship. Though they didn’t intend to be opposed to the government regulations on tea, obviously many of them looked down on those regulations, such as the updated definition of Puer tea set down by the government of Yunnan. The organizers and their participants said that they could easily find mistakes in official definitions, and some didn’t care how Puer tea was defined at all. They were also against those people in the tea academia, who, in their eyes, only worked in the laboratory and seldom stayed long in the tea mountains and even hadn’t had enough experience tasting real aged Puer tea. In the opinion of Dianma (web name), the general organizer of Sanzui, a Cantonese man I met in Yiwu, there were only three Puer tea experts that he could acknowledge, two from Yunnan and one from Guangdong. None of them were from academia or government, but all had great skill and knowledge of Puer tea, from hand to mouth, that is, from production technique to tasting ability. And the Sanzui chahui was particularly opposed to those who spread gossip that played down Puer tea’s merits after the market crisis. By holding a large chahui, they wanted to give participants a chance to truly experience the aged value of Puer tea that had been stored well.

In the attempt to counteract all the above agents, the organizers of the Sanzui chahui emphasized one thing: one’s own taste ability. There was a famous post on the Sanzui website of Sanzui in 2007 titled “To immunize against huyou: be loyal to your own senses” (忽悠免疫——忠实于感觉本身) (Shengse Chama 2007). Originally huyou was commonly used in China’s northeastern dialect to mean irrelevant, exaggerated or nonsense words (baihua, 白话), which often reduce the judgment of the audience or create a vague mind. Since the term was used by Zhao Benshan, a famous comedian from northeast China, in his performance at the 2001 CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala, huyou has been popularly used to refer to cheating, swaying, propaganda, wheedling or agitating someone with unreal content. Compared with the serious crime of fraud, huyou contains milder sense of cheating, and is often used in a jokey or sarcastic
context. Since Puer tea’s popularity, it had also been widely used, meaning to strategically sway, direct, cultivate or infect others in order to promote tea sales or somebody’s fame. As a result of huyou the tea taste becomes an acquired taste, rather than being based on one’s own innate feeling and judgment. This Sanzui post revealed the fact that Puer tea had been shaped largely by many “packaged” values, namely all sorts of exaggerated statements and mistaken information. The web post appealed to people to conduct taste evaluation depending on their innate preferences rather than other external factors. That is, faced with the risky jianghu of Puer tea, one must depend upon one’s own tasting skill in order to discover authentic Puer tea. This tasting skill is simple as it avoids any exterior interference, though it is also difficult because it relies on innate talents as well as diligent practice.

One month before the Sanzui chahui, I was at another chahui hold by a local newspaper. Mr. Yan, the organizer of the Sanzui chahui, was there, too. In about two hours we were served eleven kinds of Puer tea, mostly quite young. Due to a lot of tea being served in a limited time, each tea could be tasted for only two or three runs. According to Mr. Yan, this could not show how long the tea could stand up to being infused. And sometimes tea serving was in disorder and confused. After tasting, the participants were asked to write down the exact age and production origin of each tea. Those who got the highest scores received rewards, and those with the lowest scores were required to buy something. Mr. Yan was obviously unsatisfied with the tea, the serving and the regulations. It was at that occasion that he told me about their forthcoming Sanzui chahui. In a comparative sense, he told me that their chahui would make people fully enjoy drinking Puer tea. He later put his promise into practice. The Sanzui chahui lasted longer with each tea being fully infused; it set different competitive regulations for the participants; it provided more aged Puer tea infused with strict techniques; it created a distinguished atmosphere for the event; and most importantly, it asked participants to be loyal to their own senses and to express their true comments about the tea taste.

4 These interpretations have been drawn insights from the website: http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/17288829, http://zh.wikipedia.org/zh/%E5%BF%BD%E6%82%A0 (accessed 20 June 2010).
5 Once the tea is put in the pot it is then brewed several times, depending upon the category and the amount of the tea. I refer to each of these brews as a “run.”
The Sanzui chahui was held at the tea house of Mrs. Fan, well known on Sanzui as an expert tea infuser. It was located beside a lake in a quiet residential district, in keeping with the old custom that a tea house should be remote from noise and distraction. I went there after a full lunch, being afraid that an empty stomach would not be able to bear too much tea served through that afternoon. When I arrived, the ground floor of the tea house was crowded with guests, all watching Mr. Yan, the organizer, allocate six kinds of Puer tea. Chinese zither music was playing in the background, setting up a melodious and slow tone to accompany the tea drinking, although the effect was negated by the large crowd.

Although it had modern elements and materials, such as western style sofas and lights, the tea house largely imitated an ancient Chinese style of decor. An obvious example was a latticework wooden screen in a round shape. Several chairs and tables were made in the Ming style. Traditional Chinese flower-bird paintings and calligraphy were hung on the walls. In many corners stood ancient style vases and jars, not to mention the delicate tea sets on the shelves and tables. All aimed to give the tea house an “antique feel” (Clunas 1991: 81). The physical presence of Puer tea strengthened this point. It was used as the most remarkable antique decoration in the tea house, both in the form of actual aged Puer tea in various shapes and as illustrations of past Puer tea brands.

The tea tasting event aimed to create an ancient aura. This included the decoration and the atmosphere of the tea house, the method of tea infusing and the way the event itself was carried out. Great attention was paid to the serving of the tea, displaying a practice that takes great effort as summed up in the Mandarin term gongfu (功夫). It’s said that only through very careful and high skill infusing, can the intrinsic quality of the tea be fully presented, enabling the participants to judge the storage feature properly. All the tea was infused with zishahu (紫砂壺), the Chinese purple clay teapot, which is acknowledged as the best vessel to make tea. Different kinds of tea were infused with different zishahu in order to create a unitary property for each pot, as zishahu easily absorbs smell. For example, the zishahu for oolong tea and red tea can’t be the same; similarly the zishahu for raw Puer and artificially fermented Puer should be different. The tea brewed in each zishahu went into a shared jug, and subsequently was poured into individual tea bowls. By pouring the tea from the zishahu into the shared jug, it is assured that every guest will get the same strength and consistency of tea, symbolizing
that each one around the tea table is equal. Both the shared mug and the individual tea bowls at the Sanzui chahui were made of glass so that the color of the Puer tea brew could be better appreciated. This helped tasters to judge the age of the Puer tea. Next came a stricter principle. It had been ignored by other chahui, but was followed very closely at the Sanzui chahui. Different infusing techniques must be applied to different tea, including different temperatures of the water, different height and direction of the water pouring into the zishahu, and different steeping time for each run. It could not rival the Japanese tea ceremony in its attention to detail, as its purpose was more to please the taste sensation rather than for spiritual inspiration. All these careful techniques embodied gongfu cha fa (功夫茶法), the craft of tea infusing. They originated in the Chaoshan area (潮汕) of southeast China, mainly for oolong tea, and had now been borrowed for many other tea types including Puer tea. The individual craftsmanship of the tea infuser finally decides how these details are carried out. At the Sanzui tea tasting, there were three expert tea brewers including Mrs. Fan. All of them had obtained the certificate of chayishi (茶艺师), the craftsman in tea infusing. Each attended one of the three tea tables. Unlike the previous chahui that Mr. Yan attended and felt dissatisfied with, each kind of Puer tea was brewed for at least five runs. Furthermore, after the five formal runs the tea was transferred into another bigger pot, which was put on the fire to boil for ten minutes. Then the boiled tea brew was further served. This was also imitating the ancient way of boiling tea (zhu cha, 煮茶). According to the organizer, this was to release all the remaining substances in the tea so that the aged value of the precious Puer tea could be fully appreciated.

This ancient aura was recorded live by modern technology. Next to the registration desk in the tea house, there was a computer with an internet connection. Three or four people who were involved in organizing the tea tasting worked on the computer. By making posts with text or photos, they reported on the Sanzui website what was happening in the tea house. Any participant, as long as he or she was a member of Sanzui, could do this, too, though most of them were fully engaged in tea tasting. Other members of Sanzui who could not attend the party responded online to present their exclamations, jokes and questions.

Those doing the web coverage never forgot to go back to the tea table to fill their teacups at the right moment, and also to collect more material for their posts. Taking photos was a key task. Many participants had digital cameras and took photos of each
tea sample in its pressed shape, when it was infused with good color, and when it was tasted. Among these photographers there were several from the mass media, such as *Puer Jianghu* (magazine), *Pu-erh* (magazine), *Kunming Daily* (newspaper) who reported the event in their publications later. At some moments there were so many cameras flashing, as if all the photographers were the recorders of a certain “historical moment.” After all, the six kinds of tea were precious and could not be obtained easily (Figure 7.5-7.10). I took a video camera with me. At the *chahui* I met another person who also had a video camera. He had been invited by the tea house owner to record the whole process. Together with the still cameras, the Puer tea served at the *chahui* was recorded and digitized by multimedia. It became modern.

So, on the one hand, the *Sanzui chahui* adopted the ancient way of enjoying tea as much as possible, including the ancient aura and the professional methods of tea serving. On the other hand, the “ancient” contents were surrounded by modern techniques and the tea tasting became a “media event.” This was a reminder of the saying about Puer tea in popular books that “it is ancient as well as fashionable” (Mu Jihong 2004: 12). And compared with the other *chahui*, the *Sanzui chahui* stressed “tasting” much more than any others. All the detailed serving procedures were publically declared to help the participants properly judge the storage feature of the tea.
Figure 7.5: *Zhongcha Huangyin* (China tea Yellow Seal). Produced in Xiaguan Dali in 2001.

Figure 7.6: *Shuilanyin* 7572 (Water Blue Seal 7572). Produced in Menghai in 1997.

Figure 7.7: *Lü dashu* (Green Tree). Tea material from Yiwu. Produced in Menghai.

Figure 7.8: 7572. Produced in Menghai in 1994.

Figure 7.9: *Xiaguan yi tuo*. Produced in Xiaguan Dali in 1988.

Figure 7.10: *Lincang yin hao tuo*. Produced in Lincang. Aged.

Silent Contest

It was a large chahui with guests coming and going. Tea tasting had to be separated into three groups in the tea house, one on the ground floor and the other two on the first floor. Each group sat around a tea table and had its own tea preparer, but the same kind of tea was prepared and tasted simultaneously at three tea tables. The ages of the six kinds of Puer tea were clearly marked at the tea tables, except for the sixth tea whose age was unknown, even to the contributor, but there was no doubt that it was aged. The six types of tea were infused one by one from the youngest to the oldest, with raw Puer alternated with artificially fermented Puer. Many previous chahui had asked participants to guess the age and the production origin of the teas. The Sanzui chahui adopted a different procedure, asking the participants to judge the corresponding storage details after tasting. Unlike other chahui that asked participants to write down their answers, the Sanzui chahui avoided such an examination-like style, and just opened the door for free discussion. By asking participants to discuss the storage environment, the organizers wanted to approach the subject of whether or not it is worth waiting for Puer tea to turn aged.

A caked Puer tea from 2001, known as Zhongcha Huangyin (中茶黄印, the character zhong 中 was yellow on the package), was the first one to be infused. Around the rectangular tea table on the ground floor, almost 20 people stared at how it was being made by the expert infuser. They observed its saffron color in the shared jug. Then tasting began. People silently sipped the tea from their tea bowls. No one talked. Mostly the real identities of people were kept secret, since they all used their web names to sign in at the reception desk, or they didn’t introduce themselves to each other, or some of them said very little at the tea table. Perhaps the serious atmosphere was just what the tea appreciation needed, but it somehow made the atmosphere cold and embarrassing. Mr. Wei, another key organizer of the chahui, in order to warm things up, provided a voiceover commentary to explain what he knew about the general life history of the tea. But he didn’t last long. He felt embarrassed by the lack of any response. No one said that the tea was fantastic; nor did anyone say it was terrible. No one stood out to disagree with Mr. Wei’s annotation, as people often did on the Sanzui website when the topic touches upon the mythical life history of Puer tea. Mr. Huang, who had been working hard at the computer desk, noticed the strange atmosphere when he returned to the tea table. He called on people to say something rather than keeping silent. Lacking
any response, he then urged Mr. Wei to continue with his voiceover. Having encountered embarrassment, Mr. Wei suggested that everyone should talk, but again this suggestion didn’t work at all.

On the first floor, Mrs. Fan, the owner of the tea house, infused tea at one of the tea tables. While busy with the tea sets in front of her, she announced to guests that the tea was carefully selected from many contributions, and they had been tasted by the organizers and proved to be excellent. Moreover, she added, all the chosen tea had been kept in “dry storage,” proving that the storage of Puer tea went on in a clean environment. This was to compare with “wet storage,” where the humidity could accelerate fermentation, but also cause bad bacteria, and hence was increasingly rejected by Puer tea collectors. More and more information about the tea was disclosed, leaving room only for comments, agreement or opposition from the guests.

Mr. Yan strengthened Mrs. Fan’s point by moving between the tea tables on the two floors. He was a well known judge of Puer tea. He had tasted all of the six samples several days before. As the main organizer, he expressed his personal feeling about each tea, hoping to provoke more comments from the guests. He asked people’s opinions after his own statements at each table, but was answered simply by brief comment such as “good.” At one stage he tried to get opinions from several people who worked for a magazine. Journalists were usually considered to be good at asking questions and giving comments. However, to Mr. Yan’s disappointment, they didn’t say much after he told them that the tea they were drinking came out of good storage. Encountering such reluctance and embarrassment, Mr. Yan’s strategy was often to make an improvised joke, relevant to the tea or to the drinkers, but without serious harm to anyone.

Throughout the tea tasting event, which lasted for about four hours, I noticed that most people kept silent. Voices often arose from the organizers or people who were good at making jokes. Many only exchanged private opinions in low tones with those known to them, or someone sitting nearby. Few people publicly declared their opinions about the tea. This made the tea event lose some of its significance for competition or discussion, and it formed a striking contrast with the disputes in the active battlefield of the website. Many people were preoccupied with taking pictures of the tea. They were collecting and preparing something for the future rather than responding to the present moment.
Based on my observations and on talking afterwards with several participants, I concluded that the silence reflected people’s concern with mianzi (面子, face). First, as several people commented, tea is a good medium for people’s communication, but the pleasure of sharing tea was only possible when there are fewer participants. The tea meeting with over 50 people, arranged in fixed seats, and with a ritualistic atmosphere, was contrary to the old Chinese custom and not conducive to communication. Many people felt too shy to express personal feelings in front of such a large audience. Many of them were afraid to lose “face” confronting the sensitive and competitive issues of Puer tea. The experience of communication on the website had taught people that you would be attacked fiercely if you dared stand out by saying something different from the general opinion. Or you could be sneered at relentlessly if you made a small mistake about certain facts.

Second, some of them also cared about of the “face” of the organizers. When the second Puer tea was served, one participant bravely declared that the tea was a bit wet and might have traveled via air, implying that it must have been kept in wet storage (Guangdong or Hong Kong) and transported by airline from there to Kunming. But he didn’t continue with his comments, perhaps because there were no other responses, and perhaps because he understood that his comments was contrary to the organizer’s description of the tea.

These tea samples, though they were not actually produced by the organizers or contributors and had been passed from one collector to the other, had been endowed with something spiritual and become an attached part of the organizer or the contributor, just like hau, the spiritual power of things in the Maori gift exchange described by Mauss (1969). The tea symbolized the master’s knowledge of being able to identify the tea, his fortune in encountering the tea, his ability to possess the tea, and his courage to reveal the tea. In this sense, the storage place of the tea was identified with the social space of the person who contributed, selected and spoke for it, so to criticize the tea was to criticize its master. In this way, commenting on the tea was to expose one’s “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1989), and in this context it became one’s “tea capital,” which might be in conflict with the “tea capital” of another participant. Criticism endangered the guanxi, the relationship between people, especially in a face to face context. Improper words could make both the speaker and the master lose “face” (Kipnis 1995).
This concern with “face” also displayed an oppositional attitude. The famous post about *huyou* on the *Sanzui* website, which advocated being loyal to one’s own innate senses rather than being swayed by external information, had been highly praised by the organizers. However, as the participants had witnessed, before and during the tea tasting, the organizers had given a great deal of guidance. That is, although the organizers didn’t like being swayed by others, at their own *chahui* they were swaying their audience. In addition, although the organizers had originally set out a subject for discussion and asked participants to freely discuss Puer tea’s storage value, all the visual and oral information they provided actually indicated that the issue didn’t need to be discussed further, and for sure Puer tea was “the older the better.”

So, participants contested in ways other than speaking, just like the heroes in martial arts novels contesting with inner force (*neigong*, 内功) rather than outer force (*waigong*, 外功). Their silence showed the attempts of the opponents to keep their distance from the organizers’ interest. It also reflected their counter attitude towards the organizers, and also the difficulty they had in finding a proper social space within the *chahui*. Silence didn’t just stand for people’s distinct self-representations but, more importantly, it reflected the way they related, interacted and contested with each other.

*The Space of Belonging*

As the *chahui* continued, I gradually noticed that some people became more likely to express themselves when a certain tea gave them a sense of belonging. This was most obvious when the tea tasting reached the fifth sample, *Xiaguan yi tuo* of 1988 (下关乙沱, produced in Xiaguan Yunnan and shaped like a bowl).

I continued filming all through the *chahui* while joining in the tasting. My tasting sense somehow was lost because I was focusing on the film, but it suddenly became strong through the camera lens when tasting the 19-year-old *Xiguan yi tuo* commenced. It was not that my own taste sense suddenly became strong, but through the camera I sensed something different in several people’s expressions as they drank the tea. I was at the table of Mrs. Fan at the time. Mr. Zhang, the chief editor of one of the popular Puer tea magazines, suddenly came over from the other tea table, to chat with two friends he

---

1 In the English version of Jin Yong’s *The Book and the Sword*, “inner force” is interpreted in the glossary as: “... this is the part of *kung fu* concerned not so much with particular techniques (moves, styles), but with the basic underlying physical (breathing, posture, etc.) and spiritual (meditation, concentration, consciousness) training, which gives the techniques their inner strength” (May and Minford 2004: xix).
knew around this tea table and join their efforts in tasting. They were trying to sense the tea with more gestures, indulging in their personal experiences and not caring about the various directions they received. They sipped it with a little pleasant surprise in their eyes; they smelled the empty teacup over and over; they chewed the tea in the mouth trying to sense it even more. Then, for the first time at the tea meeting, I heard someone express his own taste feeling directly. Mr. Zhang and his friends gave this tea very high praise and, using a metaphor, they concluded that it was *mengcha* (猛茶, very vigorous tea), like the *kungfu* of *Shaolin* (少林) that is played with sticks, in contrast to the seemingly softer *Taiji* (太极).  

According to the authoritative view of many tea experts, good Puer tea should be sun dried (*shai qing*, 晒青); if it is machine or fire dried (*hong qing*, 烘青), it won’t be suitable for long-term storage. This *Xiaguan yi tuo*, a raw Puer tea that was nineteen years old, is well known as being machine or fire dried by the Xiaguan tea factory in the pre-production process; it was later naturally fermented, though Mr. Zhang and his friends were unsure where. But they agreed that it had been in relatively dry storage, which they saw as a positive post-production environment. Its excellent taste that day proved to Zhang that the authoritative saying was not always correct, as machine or fire drying isn’t always bad and good dry storage can play a significant role in directing the natural fermentation of Puer tea towards a pleasing result.

Before this *chahui* I had got to know that Mr. Zhang was a raw tea connoisseur, someone who stuck to raw Puer tea, the naturally fermented kind, whether young or old. He despised artificially fermented tea. Among the three kinds of raw Puer tea served at the *chahui*, the 1988 *Xiaguan yi tuo* was the one he liked most. At that moment Mr. Zhang shared a similar interest with his two friends as well as with the organizers who recommended and brewed this tea. By challenging the authoritative position, he found a sense of belonging at the *chahui*, a kind of social space in which he felt meaningful and pleasant. And thus he could not help expressing comments, in contrast to his previous silence.

---

*Shaolin kungfu* is remarkable famous martial arts school, named after the Shaolin Temple in central China. It is often practiced with sticks and vigorous motions. By contrast, the *Taiji* (Grand Ultimate) school stresses inner spiritual training. For further details see the glossary in the English version of Jin Yong's *The Deer and the Cauldron* (Minford 1997).
However, not everyone reacted like Mr. Zhang, reaching a moment of excitement and finding a feeling of personal belonging. On the contrary, quite a few people were displaced by the tea meeting, and all the different tea that day tasted bad to their senses. The case of Mr. Yang was typical. I met him at a tea training class where he taught children how to properly infuse tea using the gongfu technique. He also supervised them in practicing traditional arts such as Chinese poetry and calligraphy. The tea classroom was also his tea house where he drank tea with close friends. In the classroom space, he was respected very much by the children, their parents, and his friends. He was praised as a highly professional tea master (Figure 7.11).

Yang was also a participant in Sanzui and was one hour late for the chahui that day. I saw him when he signed in at the front desk and he was then directed to the first floor. No more than one hour later he came downstairs. He said to me in a low tone, “I am leaving. It doesn’t make sense staying here. I’ll hold a chahui at my tea classroom soon. Please come to enjoy it. It definitely will be much better than this one.”

He did so about one week later. I joined in and heard more about his complaints. He admitted it was not good being late for the Sanzui chahui, but he thought it was incumbent on the organizer to give each participant a proper space to sit. He managed with difficulty to find a seat at the corner of one tea table, but no one noticed that he had just come in and no one served him a tea bowl on time. Even later, when he managed to get a tea bowl he found it hard to reach each brew. He also found it difficult to communicate with others present. Now sitting in his own space he acted as the infuser for ten people. He interpreted the Chinese tea law to me:

What is interesting about tea is that it is a good medium for people’s communication, as I am teaching children something via tea. If you have tea but lack good communication, the tea loses its significance and I’d say that it is infused unsuccessfully.

Yang served us more than six kinds of Puer tea. Unlike Sanzui chahui that used electric kettles to boil the water, he used firewood (Figure 7.12). Honestly and loyal to my own senses, I’d say that Yang’s tea didn’t rival those served at the Sanzui chahui. But obviously to Yang, they were much more enjoyable. In contrast to his inability to find a
seat at the Sanzui chahui, now he was sitting in the master’s seat. The tea classroom was precisely the social space where he had a sense of belonging.

Figure 7.11: The tea classroom of Yang. The parents of the children (on the left) are observing.

Figure 7.12: (Left) Yang used firewood and a silver pot to boil the water.  
Figure 7.13: (Right) Frequent visitors have their own tea bowls at the master's tea room.

Yang was not the only guest who felt uncomfortable about the Sanzui chahui. Ping was another. He went to the Sanzui chahui as strongly encouraged by Zhang, his friend, the chief editor of the Puer Jianghu magazine. Unlike Yang who had no acquaintances
there, Ping sat with Zhang and some other friends from the mass media. He was greeted warmly by Yan, the organizer, because Ping was a well-known writer on Puer tea in Yunnan. He tasted all of the tea that day but left before the event formally ended. A month later, when I talked to him, he recalled the tea event as an unpleasant experience. He commented that it was just *fu yong feng ya* (附庸风雅), a kind of cultural pose, and all the tea there was worth nothing.

Since reading Ping’s works on Puer tea some years ago, I had known that he was also a raw Puer connoisseur, like his friend, Zhang. But from talking with him, I learnt that he was an even stricter naturalist on Puer tea drinking. What he rejected was not only artificially fermented Puer tea, but also raw Puer produced by large-scale tea factories. He was only fond of handcrafted raw Puer from small-scale production. Furthermore, it should be clearly recognizable where the tea had come from. For example, some of his Puer tea came from a close friend in Xishuangbanna. That friend was a tea master. He went to the nearby tea mountains to pick tea leaves and processed himself. Ping regarded that kind of Puer tea as precious. Otherwise he looked at most of the Puer tea circulating in the market, and especially the tea that was gifted at certain conferences or ceremonies, as trash.

Ping also strongly emphasized the contribution of the Yunnanese to Puer tea, compared with the dominant tea literature from central China and the dominant consumption trends of Puer tea in Guangdong, Hong Kong or Taiwan. This made me realize that, to him, the pursuit for raw Puer tea was not only rooted in traditional Chinese ideas about nature, but was also linked to his personal identification as a Yunnanese. He regarded raw Puer tea as being more indigenous to Yunnan whereas artificially fermented Puer tea was invented to respond to the consumption demand of drinkers in Guangdong and Hong Kong (see more about this in Chapter 8).

Besides Yang and Ping, there were others who made negatives comments on the tea at the *Sanzui chahui* even without attending. Wen was an example. I met him in Yiwu when he went there in spring and autumn to buy basic tea material. During summer and winter, he sat in his own tea house in Kunming, gathering with friends and sharing his achievements, the tea he traded and supervised for processing. He was a well-known member at the *Sanzui* tea website, but he didn’t go to the *chahui*. I asked him why when I went to his tea house. He said, “I think it’s nonsense. I would not like that tea even
without going. I know there will be some people who are fond of directing others.” Wen’s tea house was not open to the public, but a private space for some tea enthusiasts. Wen jokingly called his frequent guests *menke* (门客), like retainers who originated in China in the eighth century B.C., who were accommodated by the master and who served the master. Some *menke* came to Wen’s tea house almost every two days or every week to share tea drinking without paying for it. But once Wen was back from the production area they definitely bought Puer tea from him for further drinking back home (Figure 7.13). He was respected by his *menke* as a tea master with tea knowledge that extended from the tea field to the tea table, and he was happy and capable to answer many tea questions.

By keeping silent at the *Sanzui chahui* or even not attending it, these various people displayed an interest that was distinct from the organizers of *Sanzui*. In order to declare their opposition, they held their separate *chahui*. But paradoxically, although they resisted being swayed at the big *chahui*, they then swayed their own audiences in their own social spaces.

Another case that is distinct from those discussed above involves Puzi (web name). He was also one of the organizers of *Sanzui* and attended the big *chahui*. But unlike Yan or the other organizers, he seldom spoke, though it was well known in the web circle that he had considerable tea knowledge. I met him in Xishuangbanna when he organized a small team for a field investigation of Puer tea. Back in Kunming I visited him many times. Unlike the separate *chahui* discussed above that often had many people and were held at independent tea houses, he preferred not to call his tea tastings *chahui*. He had a tearoom, which was just part of the living room in his house, simply but elegantly decorated. Usually he invited only two to four guests at a time. This was to reconcile with the Chinese tea custom: “drinking tea alone makes a person focus on the spirit of the tea; to share with another is superior; three to four people together could share more pleasure in drinking the tea; five or six is too much; and if it’s seven or eight, that’s charity” (Figure 7.14).³ I got to know that Puzi had certain principles: not to be directed by others, and also not to direct others. Puzi commented when he made tea in his own tearoom that the supreme pursuit for Chinese to drink tea should be *he* (和). *He* is a concept rooted in Chinese philosophy, meaning to achieve harmony but with tolerance

---

of diversity or heterogeneity. The Sanzui chahui looked peaceful because no debate happened there. But, according to Puzi, it didn’t really reach he. What his comments indicated was that there actually had been too many disputes about Puer tea, but they were often played out secretly and no one could really tolerate the other. These debates, and the way in which they debated, meant that tea sharing often failed to reach harmony. The Sanzui chahui was no exception. For Puzi, all the debates were often meaningless, and the most enjoyable way of tasting tea was just to share with several good friends in his small tearoom.

In martial arts novels, xiake (侠客), the Chinese knights-errant are generally those who live in the world of jianghu, subtly declaring their opposition to the court. Puzi’s case made me think of some special xiake, who retreat from jianghu itself after learning enough and getting tired of all the jianghu disputes. That is, not only did they go beyond the court but they also went beyond the jianghu. To them, neither the world ruled by the court nor the jianghu is a perfect society (Chen Pingyuan 1997: 176; Hamm 2005: 137-167). By keeping distance from both the court and the jianghu, they declare a singular interest different from that of all the other actors. But importantly, when they construct their unique social space, they are also reconstructing the way that they relate and interact with others.

Figure 7.14: “To share with another is superior.”
Conclusion: Multiple Spaces

The Sanzui chahui ended after about five hours. The guests left and the organizers stayed for an informal summary. Mrs. Fan opened the discussion by scolding Mr. Yan for failing to organize the event well. In her opinion, Mr. Yan should have asked each participant to give a self-introduction at the beginning. This would have helped with better communication during the tasting. However, she said, Mr. Yan only enjoyed chatting with particular people and, as a result, most guests remained unknown to each other and to the organizers from the beginning to the end. Few comments on the tea were collected. Mr. Yan didn’t deny this. He was tired. He hoped that there would be more comments in the virtual space of the website, to make up for the lack of comments in the actual tea drinking space.

Mr. Wei, who provided a commentary for a while on the ground floor, checked the pages on which people had signed their names. He found that there were fewer names on the pages than the actual number of participants. “Some people are too timid to declare who they are, even with their web name,” Wei concluded. This echoed Mrs. Fan’s concerns and proved that it was hard to force people to declare their names and their opinions in public. This discussion between the organizers went on for some time. It seemed to me that the organizers were not worried about the actual subject of the event, the “long-lasting” feature of Puer tea, but they cared more about the quality of the socializing inside the tea house. That is, although they had originally set down a subject relevant to tea storage time and space, what they cared most about now was actually the issue of people’s social space.

As anticipated by Yan, the discussion of people’s taste and feelings about Puer tea’s storage feature, mostly took place in the virtual space of the website. That night he opened a new post, attaching his own comments and reminding participants to write their one hundred words comment as they had promised. Some people responded and finished their work at once. Several people wrote comments very carefully, tea type by tea type, drawing on their memory and illustrating their comments with photos. Using web names in virtual space, they began to comment more bravely. Generally, they confirmed the value of the six types of Puer tea, but some people doubted the age of certain teas and suspected if it had been put in undesirable “wet storage.” These alleged shortcomings generated immediate debate. One person didn’t give detailed comments but just said that most teas were terrible. This comment met very strong rebuttal and its
author was asked to set out his criteria for good tea. The website became a battlefield again, not like the seemingly peaceful world in the tea house.

So far, there have been multiple layers of space touched upon through the *Sanzui chahui*. First, there was the tea storage space that was set as the discussion theme of the *chahui*. Second, there was the tea house where the *Sanzui chahui* was held. It should have been here that participants had a full discussion about the first layer of space, though in fact the discussion went on mostly silently and unsuccessfully. Third, there was the virtual web space, which was originally designed only as a supplementary space to the real tea house for collecting comments. In fact, this virtual space became the actual space where more “real” debate about the tea storage feature went on. It became a battlefield. This sheds light on how the web is being used in China as an important site for expressing real debates. Fourth, there were other tea houses or tea rooms where separate *chahui* were held. Although adopting separation or retreat rather than direct contest, they showed a much stronger counter-attitude than the virtual space towards the large *chahui*. Finally, there were the different symbolic social spaces of different groups and different individuals. These spaces intrinsically reflected what all the actors in the above layers of space represented and contested.

These multiple layers of space are closely related. Some of them contrast with each other, but at the same time they intrinsically reflect each other. It is the debate in the virtual space and in the separate *chahui* that sheds light on the distinctions in the large *chahui*. And it is the contrast between the “peaceful” atmosphere at the large *chahui* and the battle in the virtual space (or the complaints at the separate meetings) that tells us how socializing via Puer tea happens in a *jianghu* world full of risks, rivalry, and obscurity. No one could tolerate the other; no one could bear being swayed (*huyou*) by the other; but in fact many of them were deliberately or accidentally affecting others and, in the process, constructing their own social spaces. Thus the role of the first layer of space, the tea storage space, became less and less important. All the contests, contrasts and conflicts were developing towards the final layer of space: the social space of human interaction. And in the process of moving attention from tea space to human space, one’s personal tasting skill became less useful in judging the taste of the tea than one’s interpersonal relationship with the others.
Chapter 8 Interactive Authenticities

The enchantment of Puer tea lies in its unsolved mystery, its vagueness and its changeable meanings. It’s like a sea, vast and mighty, filled with submerged reefs and strong rapids, and no one can reach its far end. What we can do best is just to sip our own tea! (Yang Kai, Liu Yan, and Li Xiaomei 2008: preface)

A Changeable Social Biography

Zongming, a friend from Hong Kong, visited Kunming in December 2007, seven months after the tea price had fallen. Making use of his holiday, he met tea friends in Kunming, with whom he had long been communicating on the tea website Sanzui. The participants on Sanzui covered almost every province of mainland China, especially urban areas. After the Puer tea recession, many participants were having frequent mutual visits between Yunnan, the production region, and the Pearl River Delta, the so-called consumption area. Each side was eager to know what was happening in the other location, and both wondered about the future prospects of the Puer tea market. The Sanzui participants in Kunming gave Zongming a very warm reception, as they were eager to meet a person who was known as a good commentator and who might bring some new information from Hong Kong. Zongming was not a trader but just someone who had a great interest in tea. This meant that his Kunming tea friends, many of whom were tea traders, were happy to talk openly with him without worrying too much about commercial competition.

I got to know Zongming in Hong Kong one year before his visit to Kunming, when he took me to yum cha restaurants to see how Hong Kong people drank Puer tea in their daily lives. In Kunming, I joined him on some of his trips to tea houses. By describing Zongming’s discovery of how Yunnan people, particularly Kunming people, drink Puer tea, this chapter links my specific ethnography to the broader historical and social context, and presents the changeable social biography of Puer tea. When issues about consumption are raised that refer not only to Puer tea’s pre-production but also its post-production (storage), the social biography of Puer tea becomes more complicated and contested. In the last chapter, the actors tried to locate and create their own social spaces where they interacted via a discussion of Puer tea’s storage. In this chapter I will use the varying features of Puer tea in storage to display the changeable social landscapes in consumption, exemplified by the temporal contrast before and after China’s reform, and
the spatial differentiation between Yunnan—the production area—and Guangdong, Hong Kong and Taiwan—the consumption areas.

Arjun Appadurai (1986) looks at a commodity’s circulation from its detailed social biography in exchange, rather than only focusing on its exchange forms. Thus he argues that what links a commodity’s value and exchange is politics, namely “the constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining, and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks” (Appadurai 1986: 57). The value of a certain commodity, its circulation paths, the knowledge it contains, the desire and demand for it, as Appadurai shows us, are all determined by social definitions and redefinitions, and hence the authenticity of things cannot be static but shifts contextually. Following Appadurai, in this chapter I look at the tension around Puer tea as the contest between multiple self-presentations across time and space. On the one hand, the “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984, 1989) of consuming a certain type of Puer tea is shaped by a certain nature and culture, which shows a strong identification with localization. On the other hand there is the global intent to control, to provoke, and to import capital to the local. In order to cater for the outside demand, the localized “habitus” is forced to adjust and reach a certain compromise with globalization. But that’s far from the end. While compromising, the local forces are also re-domesticating the outside forces to serve in the local’s new self-presentation. Thus it becomes neo-localization, in which the global and the local elements are mixed and actually hard to differentiate, and one self-presentation is never self-determined, but actually involves the borrowed, adapted and re-authenticated elements from others, as has been mentioned by many previous studies on consumption.¹ I want to further suggest that such neo-localization is not the end, either, because there are always new forces, whether from the global or the local, to further challenge the existing authenticity of Puer tea, like the jianghu battle in which new risks and disciplines always emerge to break the old format. So, situated in the transformation of China, when old concepts meet new desires, and located in a jianghu contest, Puer tea acquires multiple versions of authenticity.

I propose this “multiple” perspective not only to pronounce the power of localization in coping with globalization, but more importantly I use this concept to argue that the interplay between localization and globalization often goes on with endless counter

¹ There are many works dealing with how localization copes with globalization in consumption, see Watson (1997), Wu and Tan (2001), Wu and Cheung (2002), Grasseni (2003), Dikötter (2007).
forces, which shape a changeable and varying authenticity for things as well as for people’s social life.

**Cold and Warm**

The first web friend Zongming met in Kunming was Hongtu (web name), who, according to Zongming’s understanding via web communications, was a defender of Yunnanese culture. For instance at the Sanzui website there was a post by a participant from Guangdong titled “Puer tea doesn’t need the Yunnanese.” This post said that Yunnan was simply the area producing the basic material of Puer tea, but the people of Yunnan didn’t contribute to Puer tea’s trade and consumption as much as the Cantonese. The post was fiercely counter-attacked by Hongtu. He enumerated many facts about Yunnan people’s contribution to tea. To him, these great contributions had long been masked because Yunnan was remote from the political and economic center of China. Hongtu’s strong identification as a Yunnanese could also be seen from his full web name, *Hongtu Lantian*, literally meaning “red earth and blue sky,” a popular description of Yunnan’s natural landscape.

As a way of entertaining an honored guest, Hongtu brewed his favorite tea, a ten-year-old raw Puer tea originating in the tea mountain of Mengku (Figure 8.1, 8.2). Mengku is located in Lincang, a southwestern sub-district of Yunnan bordering Burma (see Figure 0.1).² In recent years it had co-emerged with Yiwu, Menghai and several other places as a famous production site for Puer tea. According to Hongtu, the taste of Yiwu tea was too weak; Menghai tea was barely acceptable; only Mengku tea was enjoyable, full-bodied and remained long enough on the palate.

This tea had been stored in Kunming. Besides Hongtu, Zongming and myself, there were three other guests, who were frequent visitors to Hongtu’s tea shop and also supporters of Mengku tea. Having got used to the Yiwu taste during my fieldwork, I found the Mengku tea was scarcely palatable. And it seemed to me that Yiwu tea had a more subtle combination of sweetness and bitterness than this one. I found the praise of the Mengku fans at this tasting to be exactly the same as that expressed by supporters of Yiwu tea: “the tea of Mengku/Yiwu is the remarkable flag of Puer tea,” or “if you want to know about Puer tea, the authentic tea of Mengku/Yiwu is the number one that you must practice drinking and understand well.”

² Mengku is part of the Autonomous Lahu, Wa, Bulang and Dai County of Shuangjiang in Lincang.
Figure 8.1: Drinking tea at Hongtu’s tea shop.

Figure 8.2: Ten-year-old Mengku tea infused by Hongtu.
Zongming, although also declaring his fondness for Mengku tea, didn’t give it the same praise as the others. To him, the more problematic issue at that moment lay not in the taste difference between the different production areas, but between different storage places. The Mengku tea brewed by Hongtu was said to have been stored in Kunming for ten years, but to Zongming its aging was insufficient. He thought it was still very raw, and far from hua (滑), smooth. To tea drinkers from the Pearl River Delta, smoothness was a very important property. They thought it resulted from storage in a relatively humid place like Hong Kong or Guangdong. For them, good Puer tea needed to be very smooth in the throat when it was swallowed. It must be as smooth as lou fo tong (老火 滑), the slowly stewed soup commonly eaten in their daily meal. Drawing on ideas from traditional Chinese medicine, they argued that the smoothness of Puer tea was warm for the body. By contrast, raw Puer tea was too irritating; its intrinsic quality was cold, and hence harmful for one’s health (see Anderson 1980).

Zongming’s response to this Mengku tea made me recall a scene I witnessed in Yiwu. In April 2007, I met a group of travelers from Guangdong who were visiting an Yiwu family who produced Puer tea. The family master brewed some very recently made raw Puer tea, a superior type according to him, to entertain the guests. The guests, however, felt very nervous about this fresh tea. They only sipped a tiny bit from each run. At the third run they asked him to stop and suggested that he brew the aged tea they had brought from Guangdong. One guest told me that his heart was pumping fast when tasting the raw Puer tea. Nevertheless, in the end, all the travelers bought a large quantity of raw Puer tea from the local family. The “adventurous” raw tasting perhaps had made them foresee a good prospect for the fresh tea, hopefully via storage back in Guangdong.

Zongming, who had rich experience in tasting all kinds of Puer tea, was not nervous confronting the Mengku raw Puer tea at all. And the relationship between him and Hongtu and the other guests continued fairly well, based upon mutual respect and appreciation. But like the Guangdong travelers in Yiwu, after the Mengku brew, Zongming asked if he could infuse a Puer tea he brought from Hong Kong to show his preference. It was a twenty-five-year old tea packed in a bamboo pipe that had been stored in Hong Kong. Its brew was darker than the Mengku tea. According to Zongming, it had reached a good degree of smoothness; it had the typical herbal medicine smell that results from good Hong Kong storage; it was warm and beneficial for one’s health.
Now it was Hongtu’s turn to find it hard to comment. After a long silence he said that its smell was indeed special, but such a smell was easily forgotten once the tea was swallowed and it couldn’t be recalled until the next sip. And he said that it didn’t have a long after-taste, a property of Puer tea that he cared about very much. The other guests also commented on its “strange” taste. They were trying to appreciate this twenty-five-year old Puer tea, and although they did not despise it, they obviously didn’t think it rivaled the Mengku tea.

In my experience, most Yunnanese prefer raw and naturally fermented Puer tea, and they often have a preference for tea produced on a particular tea mountain, for instance Yiwu or Mengku. Furthermore, they prefer tea that has been stored in Yunnan rather than elsewhere. Like Hongtu, they appreciate the lingering after-taste of raw Puer tea. But of course this is only the general case, and other alternative approaches to tea in Yunnan will be mentioned later. However, for people from the Pearl River Delta, the preference is for Puer tea that has been stored in Guangdong or Hong Kong for at least five years. This, they think, creates warmth in the stomach as well as smoothness in the mouth. This is what Erino Ozeki (2008: 144-145) calls “collective taste preferences,” or “standard taste,” which is shared by groups of people living in the same natural and cultural environment. It becomes the standard against which they judge other tastes.

In popular writing on Puer tea, it has been increasingly argued that Puer tea’s post-fermentation would not occur properly until it was exposed to sufficient humidity and temperature (Bu Jing An 2007). Hong Kong and Guangdong are close to the sea and have a more humid climate than Kunming, which is located on a plateau. Accordingly, some people, mainly Cantonese, argued that Puer tea should be stored in the Pearl River Delta after production in Yunnan. It was even said that five years of storage in Guangzhou or Hong Kong could equal more than ten years of storage in Kunming. According to this opinion, Yunnan had excellent tea resources, but it was unsuitable for storage; or, Yunnanese hadn’t known enough about storage, even though Yunnan also had humid places like Jinghong in Xishuangbanna.

After staying in Kunming for only one week, Zongming was sick. He caught a cold although the weather was warm and sunny. He began to cough, and even vomited one day after eating spicy Dai food with Hongtu and several other friends. At that meal, he

---

3 The annual average humidity in, Kunming is 71% while in both Guangzhou and Hong Kong it is 78%. http://r5584.blog.sohu.com/61523524.html (accessed 10th April 2009).
witnessed how capable some Yunnanese were at eating spicy food. It seemed that the more pungent the food was, the more Hongtu enjoyed it, although he was sweating and his face was turning red. Another participant, Puzi, was even more capable; he ate chilies quietly without his face changing color at all. At the start of the meal, Zongming tasted everything out of politeness, but soon he selected only the less spicy dishes. He didn’t eat much, but he still suffered from the pungent food and had to use a lot of tissues.

A few days later, in Hongtu’s tea shop, Zongming talked about the reason for his sickness, shui tu bu fu (水土不服, water earth not fitting). The dry climate of Kunming compared with the humidity of Hong Kong was one factor. Zongming also confessed that he was still keeping to the Hong Kong habit of having a cold shower every evening. This was strongly criticized by his Kunming friends, who thought this habit was inappropriate in Kunming, and was contrary to local customs.

Puzi, a Yunnanese who was very fond of spicy food, made this point in another way. He had recently stayed in Guangdong for about three months. He said he could not bear the Cantonese food at first. It was too oily, and had no flavor. And he could not get used to the Puer tea stored in Guangdong, either. It was “like having Chinese medicine rather than tea.” However, he soon found that he wanted more of this kind of Puer tea after a meal, as the medicinal flavor of Puer tea indeed helped him with digesting the oily food. In turn, after his digestion became better, he ate more, and then drank even more Puer tea. In the end, Puzi realized that he had grown to like Cantonese food and also the Puer tea stored in Guangdong, and found that they were complementary.

Zongming nodded his head while listening, as he was exactly the counterpart of Puzi. Both of them agreed that the only way to get used to the local natural conditions was to eat the local food and drink the local drink. It was based upon such change-place-reflect that the mutual respect between Zongming and his Yunnan friends, like Hongtu and Puzi, increased. For them, once one considered the other’s position, it was found that nobody’s Puer tea had always been uniquely authentic. At this stage, they realized that

---

4 It may seem strange that Zongming regards raw Puer tea as “cold” and therefore harmful, but likes to have a “cold” shower. But the coldness of the shower isn’t the same as that in the raw Puer tea. The former refers to the temperature of the water. Hong Kong people have cold water shower because the weather is humid and mostly warm. The latter refers to the intrinsic quality of the tea in terms of Chinese medicine. For example, the intrinsic quality of lichee is taken to be hot. It is still hot even if it is eaten after being frozen.
the preference between the raw/cold Puer tea and the aged/warm Puer tea was a matter of local culture. As Zongming moved from Hong Kong to Yunnan, he saw that the authenticity of Puer tea was mobile, too. But he later found out that the authenticity of Puer tea not only diverged from place to place, but also varied in the same place according to different periods. Once it was tested on the historical timeline, the authenticity of Puer tea would become even more mobile.

Puer Green Tea: Fan and Mi

Hongtu’s tea shop became a place where Zongming met more tea friends and tried more types of tea. One afternoon he met Lao Li, who was a tea trader in Kunming. He was about the same age as Zongming, and shared a lot of comparable experiences. Hongtu took out a special tea to brew. It was special not because of its age, fifteen years; nor was it because of its storage place, Yunnan; but because of its name marked on the box: “Puer green tea made from spring buds” (Puer lù cha, chun rui, 普洱绿茶，春蕊). It was loose tea, and “spring buds” proved that it was made of the highest-grade raw material. What was confusing was that it took upon itself two identities: Puer tea and green tea (Figure 8.3). Before becoming popular in recent years, Puer tea had been categorized as dark tea (hei cha, 黑茶) by the tea academia in China. In the early 2000s, some tea researchers from Yunnan began to argue that Puer tea should be an independent tea category because it had a different production process from dark tea. Before the boundary between dark tea and Puer tea could be settled, a new dispute between green tea and Puer tea emerged. Before the 2000s loose-leaf tea made from spring buds was considered a better quality of green tea in Yunnan. At that time few consumers took much effort in thinking about the difference between green, dark and Puer tea. But by 2007, when Hongtu was going to infuse it, it had come to be recognized by the market as Puer tea despite its confusing name. The new recognition happened after Puer tea became famous, and this different recognition would give a different value. If it was considered to be green tea, after fifteen years it had no real value and could be just thrown away. But if it was considered to be Puer tea, it could be stored for a long time and could be sold for a high price.

Whatever it was, Hongtu infused it for the guests. The brew was reddish yellow, proving that some transformation had occurred. Lao Li, who had drunk a similar kind of tea when it was fresh, pointed out that its brew would be faint yellow if it wasn’t aged.
While tasting, I felt it was astringent, not as smooth as the bamboo tea, without the same lingering after taste as the Mengku tea, and lacking the fresh aroma that one would expect from green tea. Lao Li said now he had to agree with Zou Jiaju, the head of the Yunnan Tea Association, who advocated in his books and on his blog that tender tea buds were good for making green tea but not good for Puer tea and its aging; tough tea leaves and stems were better for Puer tea and the aging would make it even better (Zou Jiaju 2004: 90, 2005: 133). Zou’s suggestion had many opponents, and another of his suggestion encountered even more opposition. In this opinion, Zou argued that newly produced raw Puer tea without any further fermentation was not really Puer tea, but closer to green tea. He referred to such tea as mi (米), “raw rice,” and authentic Puer tea as fan (饭), “cooked rice.” The latter category included both aged Puer tea with long and sufficient natural fermentation and Puer tea with accelerated and artificial fermentation (Zou Jiaju 2004: 4, 2005: 109).

Zou was from Yunnan. Working in the Yunnan Tea Import and Export Company had given him many opportunities to learn about the tea drinking habits of the Pearl River Delta. And in Yunnan he was one of the famous promoters of the artificial fermentation technique. When I interviewed him, I found that he had very much taken on the idea of fan. While we were talking, he brewed the artificially fermented Puer tea which was produced by his company. Later on we went for rice noodles for lunch. There were two kinds of noodles available: thick and thin. I liked the thin noodles, but he chose the thick ones. I felt curious because the restaurant was very famous for its thin rice noodles. When I asked him about his choice, his answer was very consistent with his choice of Puer tea: “the thick one is fermented, but the thin one isn’t.”

As I mentioned earlier, raw Puer tea without further fermentation is the dominant type consumed in Yunnan. But there also existed a preference for the fermented type. Some tea drinkers attributed this preference to the condition of their stomach. They were in agreement with Zou Jiaju, and also with people from the Pearl River Delta like Zongming, who felt that fan was warm, smooth and beneficial for one’s stomach, but mi was too astringent, harmful and should only be tasted a little (qian chang zhe zhi, 浅尝辄止). Furthermore, I found that people who had been trained in the area of tea science, like Zou Jiaju, all stressed that the key characteristic of Puer tea was “post-fermentation.” That is, there must have been a certain degree of chemical reaction in the tea, whether it was oxidation or the bio-chemical reaction caused by microbes. As far as
they were concerned, Puer tea could be naturally fermented, but this took a long time. Puer tea could also be artificially fermented, which took only two or three months. Because the former, the aged raw Puer tea was not available in Yunnan—most of it having been stored in Taiwan or Hong Kong—it was the latter, the artificially fermented type, that became the reference point for the tea-science people of Yunnan. And artificial fermentation was regarded by them as a great innovation in tea processing (Liu Qinjin 2005; Xu Yahe 2006; Zhou Hongjie 2004; Zou Jiaju 2004; Ran Dianrong 2005a).

Figure 8.3: The packing of Puer green tea.

Figure 8.4: Many Yunnanese still drink Yunnan’s green tea, infused in a glass.
But this viewpoint was opposed by some producers, who didn’t take up the artificial fermentation technique, and by some traders whose business concentrated on newly produced raw Puer tea. It was also opposed by some consumers, mostly from Yunnan, whose palates were faithful to the raw type and didn’t consider that it was harmful for their health. In other publications and websites, and in informal conversation, these opponents counter-argued that Zou was shortening the history of Puer tea. They said that according to Zou’s authorization of fan, the history of authentic Puer tea could only start in 1973. They questioned how to define the compressed tea freshly consumed in Yunnan a long time ago, which was often carried to Tibet and to the Emperor in Beijing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Gao Fachang 2009: 193-194).

The ambiguous “Puer green tea” served by Hongtu and the debates between mi and fan showed the complexity in distinguishing the authenticity of Puer tea in recent years. The preference for mi or fan was not simply based upon acclimatizing to local climate and customs, as discovered by Zongming. Preferences were also shaped by the negotiation of trade and consumption between Yunnan and the outside world. The consumption preferences of warm and smooth Puer tea from the Pearl River Delta were the outside forces, which had influenced the categorizing of Puer tea in Yunnan and also inspired the innovation in production techniques. At the same time there were also internal forces, the accelerating economic development of Yunnan and its desire to have a distinct self-representation. This self-representation, shaped by negotiation with the outside, presented multiple rather than singular voices.

During fieldwork I often asked my interviewees a question: “how long have you been drinking Puer tea?” This question was quite normal to ask in Yunnan, and most people answered that was in the mid or late 1990s, or sometime after 2000. No one gave a year prior to the mid 1990s. It proved that a popular and “clear” concept of Puer tea didn’t come to Yunnan until after the mid 1990s and especially after entering the twenty-first century. However, when I asked the same thing in Hong Kong, I increasingly found it was possibly a foolish question. Most of my interviewees in Hong Kong, when being asked, usually found it hard to answer. Many of them said, “I have always been drinking Puer tea.” One old man in his eighties whom I met at a yum cha restaurant told me, “I know that before I was born, my grandfather had been drinking Puer tea.”
In Hongtu’s tea house, among the guests, Zongming and Lao Li were both fifty-three. Both declared that they had grown up drinking Puer tea, one in Hong Kong and the other in Yunnan. The discussions about the “Puer green tea,” however, further disclosed that the Puer tea they had grown up with had always been different. To Zongming, the Puer tea drunk daily with yum cha in Hong Kong was fan, the artificially fermented or aged raw type. As I have noted before, the “cooking” of Puer tea from mi to fan is said to have been casually and “naturally” accomplished in the long journey by caravan from Yunnan, or via the Cantonese learning to age it in storage. These two factors seemed more plausible when they were combined with another story: from the 1950s to the early 1970s, un-aged Puer tea that was exported by rail and road from Yunnan to Hong Kong was rejected by the local consumers, who were reluctant to recognize such raw tea as Puer tea (Zhou Hongjie 2004; Zou Jiaju 2004). Rather, they preferred to wait until this raw tea was fermented in Guangdong or Hong Kong with added water (fa shui, 发水) and also blended with tea material from Guangdong. The rejection of the raw tea was due to the fact that modern transportation had replaced the slow caravan. Many months’ “cooking” by caravan was suddenly shortened to only two or three days. Under pressure from these changed conditions, the national tea factory of Yunnan sent its staff to learn the basic fermentation techniques from Guangdong and Hong Kong, and finally a more mature technique of artificial fermentation was invented in Kunming in 1973 (YTIEC 1993; Zhou Hongjie 2004; Zou Jiaju 2004). With this new technique, tea was transformed from mi to fan in just two or three months.\(^5\)

The situation within Yunnan, however, was more complicated and changeable. As the production region, it had to cater for the demands of outside consumption, but meanwhile it was swinging between its own consumption choice of fan or mi. While producing fan for the consumers of Hong Kong, the production of mi was maintained for a while for self-consumption. To Lao Li, the tea that he had grown up with before 1973 was recognized as various types of locally produced green tea (Figure 8.4). The difference between this green tea mainly depended on what kind of drying process had been used: sunning, steaming, stir-frying, or baking. Mi, the uncooked Puer tea in Zou Jiaju’s terms, actually referred to sun dried green tea, which was also called dian qing

\(^5\) But some researchers argue that such artificial fermentation techniques had been utilized by the Yunnanese much earlier, at least since the 1930s (Yang Haichao 2007).
Lao Li told us that the concept of Puer tea at that time was very vague. Normally the compressed form such as tuo cha (沱茶, shaped as a bowl) was called Puer tea (actually raw Puer); the loose-leaf tea was sometimes called Puer tea but sometimes green tea. The perplexing name “Puer green tea,” Lao Li said, could have come from such a period of vagueness. But what was clear was that if the green tea was over two years old, it would definitely be thrown away. The survival of this Puer green tea, according to his supposition, was due to careless storage by someone who actually had forgotten it, as storing Puer tea for its aged value wasn’t practiced in Yunnan until recent years.

Lao Li said that even after the artificial fermentation technique was invented in 1973, he didn’t immediately have a chance to taste the new kind of artificially fermented Puer tea. This further convinced me that the birth of this artificially fermented type of Puer tea was not for domestic consumption in Yunnan. Rather it was “to cater for the demand of the international market,” namely Hong Kong and Macao, where Puer tea was consumed and also traded to other Southeast Asian and European countries (YTIEC 1993: 160). In the late 1990s, Lao Li first encountered the artificially fermented Puer tea (some other informants say the mid 1990s). In the beginning, its “moldy” smell surprised him and made him wonder what type of tea it was. But gradually he accepted its taste as well as its function of warming the stomach. He also accepted that it was Puer tea, as he learnt from the market and some popular books.

Why did Yunnanese people start drinking Puer tea, actually the artificially fermented type, in the mid- to late-1990s? This can be explained in terms of China’s economic development. The mid 1990s was the period when China was starting an economic upsurge after the Reform and Opening-up. All kinds of material culture from overseas, such as pop music and food from Hong Kong and Taiwan, were entering the mainland and becoming popular (see Gold 1993). Yunnan, as a relatively undeveloped province in the southwest of China, was urged to accelerate its economic development under a major national project called “Opening the West” (xibu da kaifa, 西部大开发), formally proposed by the central government in the late 1990s. It was in this context that Yunnan was trying to boost its economy. For instance, the tourism in Yunnan began to increase at that time, and various forms of souvenirs were demanded. Puer tea became one of

---

6 *Dian* is the abbreviation for Yunnan. *Qing* literally means blue green. What was juxtaposed to dian qing was dian lü (滇绿), the other Yunnan’s green tea whose drying is mostly via baking. *Lü* means green.
them. One tour guide in Kunming told me that in 1996 and 1997 when she took tourists to tea shops in Kunming, it was always dark colored, artificially fermented tea that was introduced to the guests as Puer tea, a local and uniquely Yunnanese product. So, artificially fermented Puer tea consumed in Hong Kong and in Taiwan (Taiwan bought Puer teas from Hong Kong) began to enter the view of consumers in Yunnan, who suddenly realized that this popular "overseas" drink was originally locally produced. And in fact, at this stage, when mentioning Puer tea, it actually referred to fan (artificially fermented Puer and aged raw Puer), whereas mi, then called dian qing, was applied to green tea.

Lao Li recalled that in the early 2000s, four or five years after his initial drinking of artificially fermented Puer tea the market began to differentiate between raw and artificially fermented Puer tea. The dian qing (滇青), Yunnan’s sun dried green tea, suddenly changed its identity to Puer tea, but was given a new name—raw Puer tea. Tea advertising encouraged the storage, rather than fresh consumption, of both raw and artificially fermented Puer tea. The involvement of raw Puer tea, as I have explained in chapter 3, resulted from cooperative action between the local state and traders to promote Puer tea output in Yunnan (Tang Jianguang, Zou Li, and Wang Xun 2007a). It was recognized that artificial fermentation needed special techniques and had high investment costs whereas raw Puer tea was easier to produce in large quantities and the "natural fermentation" could be left to the consumers themselves. That is, fan was hard to cook, whereas mi was easy to supply. This approach largely coincided with the original palate of some Yunnan consumers for green tea, with which raw Puer tea had a close relationship. At the same time, the demand for raw Puer tea by Taiwanese also lent a hand in increasing its popularity. As in Yunnan, many Taiwanese initially disliked the "moldy" smell of artificially fermented Puer tea, and they preferred aged Puer naturally fermented from the raw material (interviews with Hong Kong and Taiwan traders). As a result of these various influences, in the early 2000s Yunnan began to promote the production of raw Puer tea. In this period many popular books, by both Taiwanese and Yunnanese writers, gave raw Puer tea a superior status to artificially fermented Puer tea, as its aging was natural, hence more healthy and containing richer cultural meanings (Lei Pingyang 2000; Deng Shihai 2004). It was even rumored that artificial fermentation could even cause cancer. Yet the debate between fan and mi continued, as some tea experts like Zou Jiaju along with some researchers from the tea academia, insisted on acknowledging only fan as Puer tea. They stressed that the central
feature of Puer tea was “post-fermentation” and they argued that the microbe generated during artificial fermentation would be good for people’s health (Liu Qinjin 2005; Zhou Hongjie 2004, 2007; Zou Jiaju 2004, 2005). Nevertheless there was general agreement that both mi and fan could be stored for a long period. The old habit of throwing away tea once it was more than two years old was largely abandoned. “The older the better” became the basis for the ongoing popularity of all Puer tea.

“The Younger the Better”

After staying longer in Kunming and especially after visiting some tea production areas such as Yiwu, Zongming became more and more appreciative of raw Puer tea. He began to agree with one comment, which was often raised by Mr. Yan, one of the main organizers of the Sanzui website: “the raw Puer tea of Yiwu gives you the feeling that spring water is slowly running in your mouth.”

One afternoon Zongming was invited to Puzi’s private tearoom to taste Puer tea of varying age from Yiwu. Puzi had a fairly complete collection of Yiwu’s Puer tea, from 2002 until 2007. I also took an “authentic” Yiwu Puer tea along to the tasting. I had handcrafted it myself, taught and helped by a local tea producer when I first visited Yiwu in November 2002. I treasured it very much and had only tasted it twice with my family when it was three years old. The taste at that time was not so satisfying and I thought it would be better now that it was five years old. Puzi thought that my tea was more authentic than his 2002 tea and should be brewed first.

I opened the paper wrap carefully. It looked a bit oval; the center and the edge were almost the same thickness. This was a badly shaped Puer cake. In contemporary Yiwu, a Puer tea cake should be perfectly round; the central part should be thicker than the edge; and in between there should be a gentle slope known as the “Dragon’s Ridge” (longji, 龙脊) (Figure 8.5 and 8.6). The tea material, totally 357 grams for my cake, only cost 10 RMB at that time. But we all knew that Puer tea from Yiwu, of a similar age, was now sold in Hong Kong for more than 1000 RMB.
Figure 8.5: “Dragon’s Ridge” on the top side of the tea cake.

Figure 8.6: A concave shape on the underside of the tea cake.
Puzi brewed it carefully, with the correct water temperature and using a good quality tea set. He was an excellent tea brewer. It was common that poor quality tea could turn out better as a result of his brewing. However, after the first run, no one celebrated. Puzi brewed even more carefully for the second run, but we still found it hard to praise the tea. At the third run, I had to admit that it was still quite astringent. Puzi and Zongming agreed, but Puzi said that it had a light aroma like dried prune, a term commonly used by the Cantonese, which he learnt not long ago in Guangdong.

We stopped after the fifth run, and Puzi began to infuse his own Yiwu tea of the same age in order to make a comparison. This one had a stronger prune aroma. This was probably due to Puzi’s better storage: whereas I had only used the tea’s original thin paper wrapper and kept it in a corner of my study, he kept the original package and further wrapped it with thick brown paper which was good for retaining the tea’s aroma and protected the tea from any light. Nevertheless, we all felt that Puzi’s tea had the same astringent taste.

Then Puzi brewed the Yiwu tea produced in 2003. It was loose tea, which he had bought before it was compressed. In theory Puer tea in loose form should change more quickly than compressed tea during storage, because of its greater contact with the air. All of us agreed that it was a bit sweeter. But without the previous teas to compare it with, we definitely would have considered it to be astringent, not smooth at all, in terms of Zongming’s standard. Like me, Puzi treasured this tea very much and didn’t drink it unless he had good friends to share them with. And since Kunming was his home, he had always stored tea at his own house or his parents’ house. The unsatisfying taste on this occasion, however, made him begin to waver about where to store the tea. In the past three months, during his stay in Guangdong, he had been swayed by friends there, who argued that Puer tea should be stored in Guangdong, where the climate was more humid. But he understood that this view should not be expressed widely, or he definitely would be criticized by friends in Yunnan, like Hongtu.

Next Puzi brewed the Yiwu Puer tea of 2004. It was smoother, but still a long way from the standard expected by us.

Finally, Puzi brewed some very raw Puer tea produced in Yiwu during the recent spring. This tea, which had been stored in Puzi’s house for less than one year, hadn’t undergone any obvious change, but to me it was the first one that was recognizable as very
authentic Puer tea from Yiwu. Soon after I had the first sip, a subtle flow like steam sprung up in my mouth; its sweetness overcame its bitterness and whirled long enough; it succeeded perhaps not in smoothness—I’d admit that it still had certain degree of astringency—but it had a taste that was gentle but also firm. Puzi and Zongming, although not having the same passion for Yiwu tea as I, agreed that this very raw one was much better than the previous ones we had drunk together that day. And again Zongming cited Yan’s description that this was indeed like spring water.

At this stage, Zongming couldn’t help concluding that the younger the tea, the better its taste. This was contrary to the popular saying about Puer tea “the older the better.” Puzi largely agreed and thought this view could be applied especially to some Puer tea, like Yiwu’s, whose original taste was not too strong. The conclusion in this small tearoom was obviously inconsistent with the dominant market view that encouraged the storage of Puer tea. This contrast made me recollect my tasting of seventy-year-old Tongqing and Songpin Puer tea in Hong Kong. Those two aged teas both originated in Yiwu and had been used by connoisseurs as a flag, a lodestar, for all the new generations of Puer tea. That was, consumers were encouraged to buy raw Puer tea, store them and wait for the day that the tea could turn out to be as valuable as Tongqing or Songpin. The problem was that Tongqing and Songpin were actually stored in Hong Kong. Nowadays, some tea companies and connoisseurs had started storing their Puer tea under controlled conditions, to imitate the temperature and humidity of Hong Kong. Most ordinary consumers were encouraged to store Puer tea, but they were seldom warned that they could get a bad result if they failed to store it in a “professional” way.

I wondered out loud if anyone had argued on the Sanzui website that some Puer tea, like Yiwu’s Puer tea, should be drunk as fresh as possible. Puzi and Zongming said that no one had, because such an argument would offend both Yunnanese and Cantonese, who both preferred to dress Puer tea in terms of “the older the better.” Zongming wondered whether the Yunnanese, most of whom had actually got used to raw Puer tea in terms of their palate, could influence the Cantonese to accept some of the merits of raw Puer tea. Ming’s thinking was prompted by two factors. First, the tea farmers of Yunnan were suffering from the recession in the Puer tea market, and traders were worrying about who would buy their products. After the Puer tea recession, there was a saying from Guangdong: “even without buying another piece of Puer tea from the production area, Guangdong would not consume all of the stored tea for five to eight years.” To counter
this saying, some Yunnanese traders had advocated an alternative: “Puer tea is used for drinking rather than only for storing.” If raw Puer tea could really be appreciated by more people, Yunnan’s Puer tea industry, especially tea farmers, would have much better prospects. Second, his suggestion was more broadly connected to the mutual influence between Yunnan and the Pearl River Delta. As the last section argued, the production and consumption of Puer tea in Yunnan has been shaped by demand from outside. And Zongming wondered whether Yunnanese could counter-effect the other conversely. But Zongming was also aware that the biggest difficulty would be the economic gap between Yunnan and outside areas. At the moment Guangdong, the most developed region in China, was the biggest distribution and consumption area of Puer tea, while in contrast Yunnan was still relatively undeveloped. Therefore, the intrinsic problem was whether a less developed area could affect the consumption habits of a developed area.

After being “naturalized” by Yunnan’s climate and its raw Puer tea, Zongming began to recognize the possibility of “the younger the better.” But it was not an easy view to promote. When Zongming met Mr. Yan at Hongtu’s tea shop, he put his new idea to him. Yan shook his head and would not allow Zongming to go on trying to persuade him. Though Mr. Yan often described good quality Puer tea in terms of spring water, a common way of referring to raw Puer tea, as a tea trader he still preferred “the older the better” in terms of his own understanding about commercial profit. Having adopted the concept of “the older the better,” he was not going to change his mind in a hurry.

New Tradition

When we tired of sitting around the tea table, Hongtu, Lao Li and I took Zongming for a walk around Kunming. This trip allowed Zongming to see how the updating of Puer tea’s authenticity had been occurring alongside urban development in Kunming.

We started from Hongtu’s tea shop. After walking for only five minutes, Zongming soon noticed there were many tea shops nearby. Hongtu’s tea shop is located just beside Green Lake Park, a central leisure place in Kunming. Surrounding the lake, which is about two and a half kilometers long, there are almost 30 places available for tea. There are about five more located inside Green Lake Park. These tea shops can be categorized into three main types. The first type was like Hongtu’s tea shop, which sells tea, mainly Puer tea, along with tea sets and associated decorations. Guests can sit down, talk to the
tea master, and have a free tea tasting before actually buying. But seats are limited and only available for seven or eight people at a time. The second type is larger and has many tea spaces. The main service in these shops is to provide infused tea for guests to enjoy by themselves. Some also supply snacks, all sorts of juice, and even wine. This is the most common type of tea shop around the lake (Figure 8.7, 8.8). The third type is the least common, but looks the most remarkable. This type acts as both a restaurant and tea house. They use old quadrangle courtyard dwellings, mostly built in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century by wealthy people. With tiled roofs, wooden pillars, wooden floors inside and stone paving in the courtyard, they share a lot of similarities with traditional houses in Yiwu. But after re-decoration they look more luxurious. Formal lunch and dinner are provided, accompanied by tea or alcoholic drinks. Sometimes there are zither music performances. In between meals, some guests also come just for tea (Figure 8.9, 8.10).

Kunming is the most important center for Puer tea distribution and consumption in Yunnan. The area around Green Lake Park is only one of the famous places where retail tea shops or tea restaurants are located. For wholesale tea trading, there are nine big wholesale tea markets, scattered around the urban fringe. The earliest one opened in 2002, and the largest one had almost 600 tea shops. At the end of 2007 it was said that four or five more wholesale tea markets were under construction, but there were doubts about their successful opening due to the sudden recession in the Puer tea market.\(^7\) According to one survey at the end of 2006 there were a total of 4000 wholesale, retail and service tea units in Kunming.\(^8\)

---

\(^7\) The nine wholesale tea markets were: Kangle tea market, Jinshi tea market, Xiongda tea market, Tangzixiang tea market, Qianwei tea market, Juhua tea market, Xiyuan tea market, Dashanghui tea market, Jinli market.

\(^8\) This survey was done by the Promotion Association of Kunming Ethnic Tea Culture and the Long-Run Puer Tea Institution of Yunnan Agricultural University (Yunnan Daily 2006c).
Figure 8.7: The second type of tea house can cater for more guests.

Figure 8.8: The second type of tea house supplies other drinks besides tea.
Figure 8.9: This tea house-restaurant is located in a building built during the Republican period (1912-1949).

Figure 8.10: The courtyard is also used for dining.
Zongming was amazed at the number of tea places in Kunming. Though Puer tea consumption had long been more important in Hong Kong than that in Kunming, there are no tea markets in Hong Kong that came close to the scale of the markets in Kunming. Most retail or wholesale specialized tea shops in Hong Kong are concentrated in one commercial district, and there are only around ten shops in total. Most Puer tea is cheaply consumed in large quantities in Hong Kong’s numerous yum cha restaurants. When Zongming commented on this contrast, I recalled the words of an old tea trader in Hong Kong: when handing me a cup of Puer tea brewed from a big porcelain pot in his office, he said, “sorry, we Hong Kong people don’t drink Puer tea as exquisitely as you Yunnanese.” What he meant was that he was not using a delicate tea set and a sophisticated method of tea infusing (gongfu cha fa in mandarin, 功夫茶法), which was now popular in Yunnan, both in the cities and in tea production areas. I was amused by this comment, and in politeness I replied that Yunnan had learnt a lot from Hong Kong about how to drink and store Puer tea. I found this exchange to be thought provoking. The Pearl River Delta, especially Hong Kong, was known as a developed economic region, whereas Yunnan had long been known as a lagging and poor area. But whereas Puer tea was continuously, routinely and “quietly” consumed in Hong Kong, it was being treated in a more sophisticated manner in Yunnan. Zongming’s surprise about the numerous and luxurious tea houses in Kunming was echoing the old man’s comment. But Hongtu, Lao Li and I understood that the sophisticated and “luxury” treatment of tea had only become popular in Kunming over the past five to seven years.

A social survey undertaken during the period of the Republic of China (1912-1949) showed that there were 350 tea houses in Kunming (Chen Zhenqiong 2004). Tea houses were categorized into four types at that time. The first was qing yin chaguan (清饮茶馆), literally a tea house for “pure tea drinking,” which served nothing but tea, but sometimes allowed peddlers to sell snacks. This type made up 90 percent of the tea houses. The second one was bo yin chaguan (播音茶馆), literally “broadcasting tea house,” where tea drinking was accompanied by music. The third one was qing chang chaguan (清唱茶馆), literally “pure singing tea houses” where tea drinking was accompanied by singing performances. The fourth one was shuo shu chaguan (说书茶馆), literally “telling stories tea house,” where tea drinking was subordinated to storytelling.

---

9 Many private tea companies in Hong Kong supply tea for local tea restaurants or international traders, but they don’t necessarily open tea shops or tea houses.
10 It is uncertain what year the survey was conducted.
This last type of tea house was the one that people in Kunming now had the greatest interest in recalling, as it combined two kinds of very typical and traditional Chinese entertainment. All four types of tea house functioned not simply as places for quenching the thirst, but as a place for people to socialize, or for individuals to enjoy a “quiet” time among noisiness, perhaps all day. The survey also showed that the dominant tea consumed in these tea houses was green tea produced in Yunnan. The term Puer tea was mentioned in this survey, but its definition was obviously very vague, roughly referring to good quality green tea.

The years from the 1950s to 1970s saw a decline in these public tea places. Partly this was because of the nationalization of privately owned business after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. And partly it was because of the economic difficulties China faced, especially during the early 1960s. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), political struggle became the dominant political theme and anything relevant to consumption was condemned. Lao Li was born in 1955. He could recall when he accompanied his father to storytelling tea houses when he was less than ten years old. He clearly remembered that most tea houses like that were closed when the Cultural Revolution began and when po si jiu (破四旧), destruction of the Four Olds, was advocated. The Four Olds referred to old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. Tea houses with storytelling, singing or broadcasting were certainly considered to be old and undesirable. And Lao Li told us that drinking in tea houses at that time was despaired as a luxury activity. As a result, tea was drunk mostly at home or in the office and bought from a few national or collective grocery stores. The dominant type of tea was still the green tea of Yunnan, which could be sun dried, stir-fry dried or baked.

After the Reform and Opening Up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, traditional public tea houses together with other entertainment such as storytelling were gradually revived in Kunming. Lao Li recalled that one shop that specialized in selling tea was opened in the commercial center of Kunming. This was the period that I could start recalling together with Lao Li. Being a local Yunnanese born in the mid 1970s, I remembered that both at home and in public, the green tea of Yunnan was the dominant type of tea, brewed simply in a glass. But it was well known that Puer tea was tu te chan (土特产), literally a special and local product, and could be used as a gift to people from other provinces. But its image was still very vague, and it mostly referred to compressed types of tea.
During the mid 1990s, public tea houses with a "modern" style sprang up in the city center, such as around Green Lake Park. By modern, I mean that western elements were used in decorating: western-style tables, sofas and curtains. Popular music, both western and Chinese was played. And, besides tea—still mostly green tea—ice cream or juice was also served. Some of these tea houses were more like a bar or café, but they were called tea houses, like the major ones around Green Lake at present. They were often located in new buildings with higher prices, and more commonly patronized by younger people; while the traditional tea houses were in older streets, and with older customers.

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, bigger changes have happened. An international horticultural exhibition was held in Kunming in 1999. Around that time, the city government began a new master plan in order to build a "New Kunming." Old streets and old houses were torn down, which in turn led to a reduction in the number of traditional tea houses. However, it was at that moment of destruction that a new style of "traditional" tea house and tea restaurant emerged in Kunming, like the third type of tea house around Green Lake nowadays. It was also at this moment that Puer tea, an old local product of Yunnan but endowed with new meanings, became the dominant drink in all the tea shops in Kunming.

As Eric Hobsbawm (1983) point out, something seemingly old is often the result of recent invention. He uses the term "invented tradition" mainly to refer to the discourse of nationalism. A case study by Hugh Trevor-Roper (1983) in the same book uses the recently invented selling of Scottish kilts, tartan patterns and bagpipes to further show us that such nationalist passion inevitably follows a process of commoditization. Likewise, the emergence of Puer tea's popularity is also the result of tacit and selective repetition with the past. As Hobsbawm (1983: 5) puts it, "Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes." It is through such re-invention that Puer tea is proclaimed to be the very tradition of Yunnan, even though its authenticity has been continually changing. Moreover, all the new meanings about its tradition are strategically applied to convince the consumers of a "worthwhile" investment. In this regard, Puer tea is discursively constructed and symbolized towards a localized nationalism, which intrinsically has the same flavor as that of commoditization.
In her description of the same period of spatial change in Kunming, Zhang Li (2006) calls for a rethinking of the relationship between space and power, modernity and development in China’s post-Mao era. As she notes, the diminishing of old streets and the restructuring of Kunming was implemented by the local authorities and the real estate sector in the name of “progress.” That was, they wanted to make Kunming a truly modern city in an undeveloped region of southwest China, escape from the reputation of “lateness” and catch up with national and international metropolitan areas. The substantial purpose behind such reconstruction, as pointed out by Zhang Li (2006: 464), was to “accumulate political capital and/or financial profits.” Zhang Li (2006: 462) successfully shows that spatial forms are never natural but contain the power of “social control and political ordering.” And specifically, her case study proves that the power of the post-Mao state is not weakened at all but reinforced through spatial reconstruction.

Zhang Li’s study depicts the exact backdrop against which Puer tea became prevalent. The newly emerged traditional tea houses were new in terms of when they were established; but they were also “old” because they borrowed numerous old elements. Some of them were established to “protect tradition,” directly locating in old, but redecorated, houses. As Zhang Li points out, this protection ironically happened after the destruction of most of the old streets. In Zhang Li’s opinion (2006: 461), the destruction and reconstruction not only transformed the spatial out-look of Kunming but also the “very modes of social life, local politics, and cultural identities.” In the reconstructed traditional tea houses, what was drunk popularly was Puer tea, whose type, of course, also changed with the updated definition about Puer tea in the market. Since its resurgence, Puer tea had been promoted as “a drinkable antique,” something that evoked modern nostalgia. The new traditional tea houses gave a niche for people who wanted to indulge their nostalgia. Yet, the customers who frequented the invented traditional tea houses to appreciate the “drinkable antique” were relatively young people, mostly in their twenties, thirties or forties. In a comment on Zhang Li’s study, Hsing You-Tien (2006: 478) points out that nostalgia has become “a hot commodity” and “cultural discourse” in metropolitan China since the mid 1990s. In this context, the transformed tea houses and the transformed tea have become a pair, catering to the demands of the new generation of consumers for something that is both old and new. This is consistent with the ongoing consumer revolution in China, which not only changed the consumed substance but also “nurtured individual desires and social networks” (Davis 2000: i).
When Lao Li described his past experiences, Zongming was very keen to see the traditional tea houses that had a storytelling tradition. Lao Li, Hongtu and I took him for a walk along the central axis of Kunming city, where only small parts of the old Qing and Republic period neighborhoods are left. To Zongming’s disappointment, we didn’t find any old tea houses. In fact, many of the old houses were now enclosed by walls. It was said that a newer round of protection and restructuring by the local government was beginning (Figure 8.11 and 8.12). Eventually, we took Zongming to dinner. The restaurant was in a re-decorated traditional house. The courtyard and the surrounding tile roofs presented a nice quadrangle, like the Chinese character “囗” (mouth) (Figure 8.13). Sitting in the courtyard of the wooden dwelling, Zongming was served a meal of classic Yunnanese cuisine. All through the meal Puer tea was served. Zongming enjoyed the food but didn’t seriously drink the tea. He didn’t seem to think that Puer tea served in one of these “traditional” tea restaurants tasted good. After the meal, he asked to drink tea back in Hongtu’s tea shop, which, although smaller and less luxurious, was more to his liking.

Figure 8.11: Old houses were now enclosed by walls for a newer round of protection and restructuring.
Figure 8.12: New Kunming.

Figure 8.13: The courtyard and the surrounding tile roofs present a nice quadrangle.
Conclusion: Multiple Visions

The first section of this chapter sets two distinct taste preferences, which are correspondingly tied to their space identification: raw Puer tea (cold mi) for Yunnan; aged Puer tea and artificially fermented Puer tea (warm fan) for the Pearl River Delta. But as the later sections show, the facts complicate such a simplified distinction. When Puer tea is examined in different places and in different periods, there are always changeable forms of authenticity.

When the astringent flavor of large-leaf raw Puer tea initially arrived in Hong Kong and Guangdong, the Cantonese would not drink it until it became aged. In this regard, it is the Cantonese that tried to domesticate the astringency of the large-leaf category and transform it into mildness through aging. This aged value was further promoted by the Taiwanese and then brought back to the Yunnanese, who, in turn, not only realized the aged value but also began to make good use of the raw value. In this regard, mi, the raw Puer tea, is re-domesticated by the Yunnanese, being related to production promotion, consumption acceleration and Yunnanese identity. Fan, the artificially fermented Puer tea, was initially invented in order to cater for the preference of the Cantonese. But its being accepted in Yunnan should not be attributed simply to outside influence. Again, through re-domestication it is declared to be the technical innovation of the Yunnanese and hence also a distinct symbolic representation of Yunnan. Thus both Puer teas are re-authenticated and re-localized, and the re-construction of Puer tea’s authenticity is tied closely to the self-presentation of Yunnan.

The interplay between the place of production and consumption has been occurring for a long time. But never has it been as important as in the current period for consumers to clarify the identity of Puer tea, though in fact, the more clarifying activities, the more controversial Puer tea’s authenticity is.

This controversy is situated in the context of China’s transformation, the consumer revolution and the desire of undeveloped regions, like Yunnan, to promote themselves.

John Durham Peters (1997) raises the idea of “bifocal visions.” He points out that modern men and women are viewing the world from two lenses simultaneously: one from his or her own eyes to see the locality close by, and the other via the modern media to see the process of globalization. In the case of Puer tea, Yunnanese people are
viewing it not only from the local perspective, but also from that of others, namely the Cantonese or the Taiwanese. The difficulty for Yunnan was that it had to take upon itself more than one identity, like Puer green tea: it needed to follow the consumption custom that had long been shaped by its local earth; it needed to adapt the aged value of Puer tea from the outside and serve it to the global market; it also wanted to take advantage of the tea’s raw value and make Puer tea a new local representation. Therefore conflict began, interwoven with multiple voices. And in the endless jianghu debate, there is always a counterforce against the temporarily established version. Puer tea’s image became complicated. Rather than having a single and localized vision, it had mobile and multiple visions. And one distinct taste preference, or one defined authenticity, is never intrinsic and fixed. Rather it is always on the way to being updated, moving along with temporal, spatial changes and with changes in the interests of those who seek to define it.
Conclusion

An Alternative Authenticity

Packaging and Counter-Packaging

This thesis has sought to illustrate two things. On the one hand it has examined how Puer tea is packaged into a popular beverage that has attracted the fascination of many people in twenty-first century China. On the other hand the thesis has shown how these packaged values are debated, counter-packaged and re-interpreted by multiple actors.

In the packaging process, there are several parallel narratives of transformation. The first is the transformation of Puer tea’s profile, from something common and unnoticed to something extraordinary, valuable and representative of high culture. The second is the new discourse about Puer tea’s aged value: in production, the older tea tree is regarded as much better than the younger tea bush; in consumption, the tea needs to be “cooked” from the raw to the aged, and the longer the storage, the higher the value. As a result, Yunnan tea’s cultivation and production is driven towards an appreciation for forest tea, and the Yunnanese consumption choice is directed towards the aged flavor. Along with this change in tea production and consumption, there is the third transformation in the representation of Yunnan, from a remote, undeveloped and earthy area into a mysterious and charming land with beautiful nature and wonderful ethnic culture. All these transformations have taken place against an important backdrop, the transformation of China’s economy and society, exemplified by the reemergence of a national tea culture fever and other forms of consumption revolution. Within these general transformations, there have been many partial and back-and-forth changes during certain periods and in certain places. The authenticity of Puer tea has developed unevenly and unstably. Puer tea is always open for history and context to define and re-define it. The unresolved authenticity of Puer tea is part of the changeable social landscape. It embodies the transformation of people’s understandings about national, regional and individual identities.

The counter-packaging process has reinforced the unstable status of Puer tea’s authenticity. In this thesis, I have stressed that the unresolved authenticity of Puer tea lies in the multiple counter forces that are present in the unpackaging narratives. I have shown that there are endless debates, controversies, suspicions and revisions relating to Puer tea’s meanings, values, regulations and representations. There is the counter force that resists accepting the aged value of Puer tea and endeavors to re-explore and re-
interpret its raw value. There is the counter force that deconstructs Puer tea’s propagandized value and wants to draw it back to its “original” meaning in order to obtain a properly balanced value. There is the counter force against persuasion, guidance, cheating and authoritative instruction, asking tea drinkers and traders to be loyal to their own judgment and to solve problems depending upon their own skills. There is also the counter force subtly resisting tough regulation, or exploring the margin beyond any regulation, and using self-help to transform indigestible standards into acceptable practices.

The above packaging and unpackaging narratives and all the debates embody what I call the jianghu of Puer tea. These jianghu forces are particularly clear in the unpackaging narratives which grow out of the popular realm and stand for non-mainstream voices. The chaotic situation of Puer tea illustrates the intrinsic feature of jianghu culture. Jianghu is filled with risk, suspicion, vagueness and contest. The debate and unpacking of Puer tea’s packaged values also fully embodies the jianghu actors’ ability to cope with risks, debates and non-standardization. These features of jianghu culture embody some important enduring as well as transformed characteristics of Chinese cultural consumption. I argue that this Chinese jianghu culture is crucial in understanding Puer tea’s chaotic situation and the responses to this chaos adopted by multiple Puer tea actors.

I introduce the jianghu concept to shed light on how the Puer tea fad and all the debates around it have been deeply shaped by a specific cultural and social context. I could have developed a broader cultural comparative perspective to deepen this understanding. A good comparison would be with red wine in the West. Both Puer tea and red wine are said to have aged value, and tastes for both are shaped by growing environments, processing techniques and storage conditions. And, of course, the social lives of both tea and wine are very much shaped by their social and cultural context. These are important similarities, but I think there may be also be an important difference. Speaking from my limited experience of reading literature on red wine as well as my red wine consumption in Australia, I feel that the authenticity of red wine is far less chaotic than Puer tea. The information on a bottle of red wine seems much more authoritative to an ordinary consumer in Australia or Europe than the information on a piece of Puer tea in China. The categorization of red wine has been more definitely fixed; many of its taste descriptions have been documented and widely shared; and most
government regulations concerning wine appear to be much more standardized than the regulations for Puer tea. So, there is something particularly distinctive about the situation of Puer tea and that is why I draw on the concept of jianghu to explore it.

**Rethinking Jianghu and Multiplicity**

While writing about the jianghu of Puer tea, I could not help imaging the responses of my informants if they read this thesis one day. I guess that some of them would agree with me because they have both suffered and benefited from the jianghu of Puer tea, and some stated directly that the world of Puer tea is like a jianghu. But, at the same time, I guess that many of them would be disappointed, because from my thesis they won’t find a singular and authentic narrative about Puer tea. Instead, they may feel that the multiple voices I have described would only make more trouble for the readers. That is, although many of them regard the world of Puer tea as a jianghu, although many of them resist the dominant singular voice from the government, and although some of them have sorted out flexible ways to survive in this chaotic and vague jianghu, in ideal terms they all wished that there could be one clear and authentic way to define Puer tea.

During fieldwork, I met numerous people who showed great interest not only in tasting Puer tea but also in knowing about Puer tea. Many of them commented that the previous writings about Puer tea hadn’t covered all the facts or had provided false information even though some of the popular writings used words like daguan (大观, a full display), or zui zhenshi (醉真实, the most authentic) in their titles. These informants may have hoped that my thesis would help to resolve some of the uncertainties. They may be disappointed and, even worse, some of them may think I am criticizing Puer tea or Yunnan, or that I am also providing misleading information about Puer tea, which would bring negative impacts on Puer tea’s development in Yunnan.

Thinking about these possible responses prompts me to rethink why I have developed my thesis within the jianghu framework. It also makes me reflect more about the anthropological perspective and methodology in exploring the authentic meanings of things.

When I started this research, I did endeavor to find out some authentic facts about Puer tea, at least for the historical sections. But soon after I began fieldwork, I found it difficult to clarify many issues concerning Puer tea. Even for a question like “what is Puer tea,” I had encountered numerous answers. I was swayed by various actors and
became confused. It seemed that everyone was believable as well as unbelievable. I doubted if I could prepare a thesis about Puer tea’s history, given that a singular and authentic historical truth may never be verified.

Many events about Puer tea were intertwined with complex human negotiations, and it became hard to clearly identify what was authentic and what was not. As I have explained in Chapter 1, my initial interest in Yiwu had been partly inspired by Zhang Yi, the retired township leader who pioneered the recovery of handcrafted caked Puer tea in Yiwu in the mid 1990s. Many tourists, traders and journalists visited him to learn about the local history of Puer tea. I visited him many times, too, and every time he spared time to answer my questions patiently. He published his own book about the history of Puer tea in the Six Great Tea Mountains in 2007. When I bought this book from him at his home, he signed these words for me on the blank page at the front: chayen yi chengxin wei zhong, literally “a tea person should care very much about honesty and faith.” That day he was talking to me about how fake Puer tea was becoming more and more of a problem in the market. On my later visits, I found he wanted to talk more about how to cultivate tea properly in a good ecosystem rather than about historical events. Mr Zhang said he wished to write another book just about tea cultivation, but he was worried that he may not be able to accomplish it because he was old and had not been well in recent years. I agreed that, to a large degree, the quality of the tea plant could be more essential than the quality of the historical truth. And I understood that maybe he had been distracted by too many historical debates.

From gossip I learnt that some people, both locals and outside traders, were suspicious about Mr Zhang and his tea. They said that some historical issues he talked about or wrote about in his book were not true. They said that he provided false information for his own commercial benefit. Some local villagers said it was good that he had taken a lead in boosting Yiwu’s Puer tea production in recent years, but it was bad that he took a lead in pollarding forest tea trees and planting terrace tea fields in the early 1980s. Some traders had bought his earliest tea products, but they questioned why the taste hadn’t improved after almost ten years’ storage. They suspected that it had not been made from pure forest tea material. I once visited Zhang’s tea terraces and saw that he had tried his best to make some adjustments, increasing the gap between each tea tree, almost like forest tea. As for his earliest tea products, he had no way of making any adjustment, as the tea had been sold ten years earlier and it had been stored by
somebody else. The suspicions and criticism became fiercer in early 2007 when Puer tea’s price reached its climax, as any judgments about older products at this moment could easily influence the value of new products. In these debates, Mr. Zhang became someone who had done half good as well as half bad for Yiwu’s Puer tea.

Mr. Zhang died of heart disease at the end of 2008. He was 67. He had suffered from heart disease for quite a long while. Some of his neighbors in Yiwu said the suspicions and criticism of him and his tea had made his condition even worse. After his death, many visitors wanted to pay their respects at his grave, but they were rejected by his son, who perhaps didn’t want his father to be disturbed any more, whether it was respectful praise or negative gossip.

Mr. Zhang’s story shows how complex Puer tea’s historical “truth” can be. It is actually difficult and perhaps also unnecessary or even impossible, to get one hundred percent authentic material for tea or for history. Both the quality of tea and the quality of history become hard to verify. If one aspect is defined too absolutely, it could easily turn out to be incorrect. It was these confusions and complexities that made me gradually realize the value of multiplicity rather than singular authenticity. The multiple voices about Puer tea debate each other and also complement each other; each voice stands for a certain purpose, contains certain values, and represents certain meanings in relation to the others. Setting out the details about this debate, divergence and interaction provides alternative narratives about Puer tea. This concern has drawn my attention towards those voices growing out of the popular realm, where multiple values exactly co-exist and which contains counter and counter-counter forces to complicate any existing versions of Puer tea’s authenticity. It is a jianghu arena where multiple actors contest, interact and solve problems contextually. In this arena, Puer tea’s authenticity cannot be standardized. It can only be managed via inter-personal negotiations. In this regard, I have taken Mr. Zhang’s voice to be one indispensable component among the multiple voices in the jianghu of Puer tea, and I have also admitted that he is one of the people who have played an important role in Puer tea’s history.

Thus I came to enjoy being an anthropologist, conducting participant observation, acting as an audience member watching the actors’ performances, asking questions when necessary and avoiding judgments about the authentic truth of Puer tea. But, of course, in reality my own understandings about Puer tea were inevitably and
contextually influenced by certain informants and certain popular writings. "To immunize against huyou" is never possible, and "being loyal to my own senses" is actually mixed up with my conscious and unconscious acceptance or rejection of external influences. In this thesis, although I don’t make a singular statement about Puer tea and don’t argue for an absolute truth, many narratives have actually more or less shown my intentions, displaying my agreement or disagreement with some points of view. On the other hand, the anthropological perspective sometimes made me puzzled about what on earth could be called authentic and where it exists. It seems that once you have indulged in an anthropological viewpoint, any statement or behavior could become abstract, non-emotional and understood in terms of constructed or packaged meanings. Thus the boundary between the authentic and the fake is blurred. The only thing that is true is that whether something is authentic or fake, it is full of politics and used for constructing certain identities. I wonder why in everyday life one needs to realize that every food and every meal is political. So, I have been composing this thesis sometimes paradoxically. On the one hand, I’ve learned from other scholars how to argue about constructed or packaged politics. On the other hand, however, I have endeavored sometimes to reduce the argument, and I have sometimes implied that I agree or disagree with certain statements about Puer tea.

Film and Alternative Narratives

Film is used as an important methodology in this research and provides even more alternative narratives about Puer tea. Its basic function is to provide some necessary visual information about Puer tea for the thesis. Specifically, it is used to trace the social life of Puer tea from production to consumption, from its harvesting in the tea fields or forest, to its processing by local families, trading in both rural and urban markets, promotion at various events, and finally tasting by tea drinkers. Bearing in mind the complementary relationship of video and thesis helped me make decisions more clearly about when to film and when not to. Rather than making a single complete film, I have made seven independent shorter films plus two stills presentations. They complement each other, and each goes with a certain thesis section. But I didn’t edit the films to completely parallel the corresponding section of the thesis. Films have their own ways of rhetoric; they have their own logic of narration, and they can display something beyond the text. Rather
than fully dominating the narrative like textual ethnography, film “to some degree allows one to look over the shoulder of the film-maker, albeit from the position that the film-maker chooses,” as the ethnographic film-maker David MacDougall has pointed out (Grimshaw and Papastergiadis 1995: 32). In a way, using film echoes the jianghu theme that I have adopted in the thesis. My thesis has shown how Puer tea is defined in multiple ways. Films extend these multiple narratives from text to video, further displaying the multiplicities in daily life, and allowing the audience to have multiple interpretations.

In the section “A battle of wits and bravery” in Chapter 2, I told how the trader Wen was unhappy when he found that the tea growers blended terrace tea with forest tea. In order to keep his business relationship with the growers he had to back down and finally accepted the impure tea material. This was what I had witnessed, filmed and written. But in the corresponding section of film (Film 5 “Authentic Tea” on DVD 2), I edited it in another way: Wen was unhappy with the blended tea material; he kept on scolding the growers; then he went on to a nearby family to buy more tea material. So, in this editing, I didn’t show whether he bought the impure tea material or not. One major reason I edited it like this is because I felt that the interference of my camera had somehow influenced the unfolding of the event. Wen’s decision to buy the mixed tea material was, of course, concerned with keeping a stable business relationship, and it might also have been concerned with leaving some “face” for the tea growers in front of the camera. But he might have also worried that if he bought the tea, this “unauthentic” event would be recorded by my camera. Reflecting on the incident, I can now see that it was actually a very difficult moment for him. To buy or not to buy, either way would be a problem for him. When I saw him encounter impure tea material on another occasion when the camera was not present, he badly lost his temper and rejected it. I came to understand that Wen was a very critical tea trader and, wherever possible, he would definitely prefer to buy non-blended tea material. This always remained his supreme ideal. So, rather than editing the film of the event to show that he bought the impure tea material—this was only one case among his many trading experiences in Yiwu—I chose to edit it with an unclear ending to imply an alternative version of reality, and left it open for the audience to ponder.

In another film “Spring Harvest” (Film 2 on DVD 1), my initial intention was to show the procedures of harvesting and processing terrace tea and forest tea. I chose the Gao
family in Yiwu for filming. Completely unexpectedly, some events relevant to a family dispute came to be mixed up with their tea work. While picking and processing tea, Mrs. Gao and her daughter kept on complaining that the daughter-in-law was lazy and didn’t help them with any work. Mrs. Gao expressed her frustrations and anger towards her son when she stir-fried the tea leaves in the evening. One possibility for editing this film was to ignore their family dispute and only show the picking and processing procedures. But I felt that these family events couldn’t really be separated from their tea work and their livelihood. All the hardness, criticism and emotion was co-stir-fried by Mrs. Gao into the tea leaves. This echoes the Chinese interpretation that tea is far more than a drink to quench thirst. And as many of my informants taught me, it would be meaningless if Puer tea was simply regarded as a broth or a liquid; it needs to be tasted together with multiple aspects of social life.
References:


——. 2002. Qiangu Wenren Xike Meng (Cha tu zhen cang ben) [The Literati's Old Dream of Being Like Knight-errant (with collection of illustrations)]. Beijing: Xinshijie Chubanshe.


Kong Chuizhu. 2007. Quanmian tuijin yi Puer cha wei daibiao de cha chanye maishang xin taijie: zai quansheng chaye gongzuo zuotan hui shang de jianghua [To fully promote the (Puer) tea industry development: a speech at the provincial tea working forum]. Puer Tea Weekly, July (55).


Li Miao. 2006. Zhongguo Dianying Zhong de Yunnan Xiangxiang [The Imagination of Yunnan in Chinese Film]. M.A. Thesis. School of Film & TV Arts and Technology, Shanghai University.


Lu Ming. 2007. *Jingti gei Puer cha mohe de shou [A precaution for those slander on Puer tea]*. *Evening Newspaper of Spring City*, 9 July.


Ma Jianxiong. 2007. *Ailao Shan fudi de zuqun zhengzhi: Qing zhong qian qi 'gaiyu guiliu' yu 'Luohei' de xingqi [The ethnic politics in the hinterland of Ailao Mountain: gaitu guiliu and the rise of Luohei in the early and mid Qing]*. *Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Lishi Yuyuan Yanjiaosuo Jikan [Collected Papers of the Research Institute of History and Language, Academia Sinica]* 78 (3): 553-600.

Ma Yinhua. 2006. *Puer cha: ceng yiluo taxiang de mingpian [Puer tea: a name card lost in an alien land]*. *Yunnan Daily Website*, http://search.ynrdaily.com/cgi-bin/detail.exe?285115+yndaily/news 89+123371+news 89+@NEWSITEM+no body+0+mark+%C6%5D%B6%FD%B2%E8%A3%BA%D4%F8%D2%5C% C2%E4%CB%FB%CF%E7%B5%4%A1%B0%3%FB%C6%AC%A1%B1 (accessed 8 August 2006).


*Puer Tea Weekly*. 2007a. Laizi Yunnan de shengyin: Puer cha xianzhuang zhi zheng ben qing yuan daxing zhuanti zuotanhui zai kun zhaokai [The voices from Yunnan: a symposium was held in Kunming to clarify Puer tea’s current situation]. *Puer Tea Weekly*, June to July (53).


Shao Wanfang. 2007. Qinggong gongcha pinyin ji [Record of tasting tribute tea of Qing legacy]. Pu-Erh 3 (6): 100-103.


Shen Peiping. 2007. Yi gengming wei qiji, puxie Puer fazhan xin pianzhang [Taking name change as an opportunity, to compose a new chapter for Puer’s development]. Yunnan Daily, 6 April (7).


———. 2010. Cha wenhua chu chuan zang qu de shijian yu kongjian [The initial time and space of tea arriving in Tibet]. *Qinghai Minzu Yanjiu [Studies of Qinghai’s Ethnic Groups]*. forthcoming.


Yunnan Puer Cha. 2006. Yunnan Puer cha jiang cheng Gedebao hao chongfan Ouzhou dalu [Yunnan Puer tea will board Gothenburg to return to Europe]. Yunnan Puer Cha, Spring: 136-137.


