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Sensorial Place-Making in Ethnic Minority Areas: The Consumption of Forest Puer Tea in Contemporary China

Zhen Ma

This article examines sensorial place-making through analysing the taste and other sensory experiences of forest Puer tea in its consumption among the urban middle class in mainland China. In the process of creating the ‘terroir’ of forest Puer tea, sensorial experience has been frequently linked to its place of origin. I argue that ethnic minorities who cultivate the tea play a vital part in the imagination of the tea’s terroir. Trips by consumers to the mountains where the tea is cultivated, which aim at facilitating a ‘full experience’ of the tea and its culture, have generated a special pattern of interactions between the urban middle class who consume the tea and the ethnic minorities who cultivate it. The consumption of Puer tea, which brings about social imaginary and transcendent economic value, has become a driving force for producing the locality of ethnic minority areas.

Keywords: Puer tea; Senses; Terroir; Locality; Ethnic Minorities

Introduction

In early June 2015, I went to Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan Province in Southwest China, to interview tea sellers and consumers as an extension of my field work on the production, distribution and consumption of Puer tea. One afternoon, I went to Kangle Tea Market, one of the biggest tea markets in Kunming, to interview Miss He, a Puer tea seller with whom I have been familiar since 2013 when I worked as a shop assistant in the tea market. As I walked into her teahouse, she was serving tea to a guest in his forties. Miss He introduced us and invited me to join their tea

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tasting. The guest was Mr Zhou from Beijing, who had been in the tea business for more than fifteen years. He ran a teahouse in Beijing and a tea shop in Shanghai. After finding out that I was a PhD student working on minority cultures and Puer tea, Mr Zhou enthusiastically invited me to share my knowledge about ethnic minority areas (*shao shu min zu di qu*) with him and his Puer tea friends (*Puer cha you*) when I went back to Beijing. When I asked him why he was so interested in Yunnan's ethnic minority areas, he responded that, 'Puer tea is part of the culture of ethnic minority areas. If you do not know the place, you cannot understand the tea, let alone its splendid taste and flavour'.

My field work demonstrates that Mr Zhou is not the only person who brackets Puer tea and minorities' areas together in evaluating the tea. In both the supply areas (such as Xishuangbanna, Puer City¹ and Lincang City) and in urban cities where Puer tea is mainly consumed (such as Kunming, Beijing and Shanghai), I constantly encountered sellers and consumers who talked about ethnic minorities, the natural and cultural environment of their areas, and the characteristics of Puer's places of origins. Some sellers explicitly told me that one cannot really sense the beauty of a tea's tastes and flavours without knowing the people who planted, harvested and processed it, and the place where it was grown. This implies the strong cultural and topographical orientation of Puer tea, which can be understood as a complex expression of the taste and cultural self-understanding of the urban middle classes on the one hand, and their understanding of minorities and the areas of minorities on the other. The understanding of tea and the imaginary of 'ethnic minority areas' are thus inextricably interwoven in urban China.

Puer tea is usually compressed into different forms, such as brick, bowl or cake. Tea farmers pick the fresh leaves, which they roast, rub and dry in the sun. Tea factories then collect these treated loose tea leaves from the farmers, then compress, pack and distribute them. The tea is of particular interest because it has a special subtle taste and stimulates different body senses in a unique way during drinking, and also because it is mostly cultivated by ethnic minorities. The Bulang (Blang), De'ang (Ang or Palaung), Hani (Akha) and Jinuo (Jino) who live in southern and southwestern Yunnan are said to have planted tea for at least a thousand years in the regions upstream of the Mekong River (Li 2011; Zhang 2014). As one of the most prevalent and costliest tea varieties in China, two different Puer are crazily sought-after by consumers. One is the 'aged Puer tea' (or 'vintage Puer tea'), which is naturally fermented during long-term storage resulting in a special fragrance and distinctive taste. And the other is the newly produced Puer tea with tea leaves purely from forest (or ancient) tea trees which have grown in the midst of forests for hundreds or even thousands of years. The first one is mainly consumed in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Guangdong Province, while the second one is largely consumed in urban areas in mainland China. Cultural values, health concerns, historical developments and modernity are intertwined in the narratives of Puer tea, but all these narratives are expressed through taste and other physiological sensations when the tea is being drunk. Senses thus play a key role in mediating the tea from a normal beverage to a sign of distinction for

consumers. Furthermore, as many consumers are eager to trace back the splendid taste from their tongue all the way to the place where the tea comes from, they travel to the ethnic minority areas to experience the taste of the tea, enabling direct contact between urban consumers and rural ethnic minority tea farmers. Sensory experience thus becomes a part of human engagement.

I argue in this article that the consumption of Puer tea goes far beyond the ordinary custom of drinking a beverage. It has evolved to encompass the particular taste of the tea, the profile of its origin and, most importantly, the linkages of consumer goods with ethnic minorities' natural environments and cultural practices. I shall begin with a literature review on senses, especially taste, sensorial place-making and Puer tea to provide the framework for my analysis. A history of forest Puer tea will follow to illustrate the inherent relationship between Puer tea and ethnic minorities. I will then give a brief introduction to the revival of Puer tea in Taiwan as this is where its revival began. After that, I will provide ethnographical elaboration on how the tea is now consumed in mainland China by the middle classes. By addressing the taste and other sensations involved in Puer tea drinking, I will show the cultural and social meaning of the tea's taste and other sensations and how the middle classes express social status and lifestyle aesthetics through tea drinking. This is followed by an explanation of how the terroir of Puer tea has been constructed by linking physiological sense perception to the place where it is produced and ethnic minorities who produced it. Finally, I give an ethnographic description of visits to the tea mountains by tea consumers, connoisseurs and sellers² who aim to experience both the senses of the tea and the 'sense' of the ethnic minorities.

Anthropological Study of Senses, Sensorial Place-Making and Puer Tea

What are senses? What are the social meanings of the senses? Are senses merely physical reactions, or constructed by culture, history, power or other social dynamics? Anthropologists have given considerable attention to taste and its relation to culture and societies (Douglas & Gross 1981; Mintz & Du Bois 2002), and have developed valuable research on other senses such as sound (Stoller 1989), smell (Classen, Howes, & Synnott 1994), touch (Classen 2005) and synesthesia (Howes 2003, 2005, 2010). We can perhaps distinguish two broad currents among the literature. One is the semiotic understanding of food and taste, exemplified by Claude Levi-Strauss's work. The second is a historical-sociological approach of the development of taste in conjunction with the capitalist production of commodities. This approach finds its sociological expression in the work on *Distinction* by Pierre Bourdieu and its historical expression in the work of Sydney Mintz.

Levi-Strauss's study of cooking inaugurated the study of senses in cultural contexts. He argues that among the five senses (visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory and tactile), the gustatory sense, which relates to eating, occupies a privileged position (Levi-Strauss 1990, 164). Levi-Strauss's emphasis on the importance of the gustatory sense is rooted in his analysis of cooking, which he interprets as the transformation

of nature into culture. For Bourdieu (2013, 2017), however, tastes are systematically correlated to social hierarchy. It is used by the upper classes as markers for their superior position in certain societies. Although the Bourdieuan sense of taste is more about a broader category of aesthetic conception than merely gustatory sense, linking taste and social status together has become one of the most important approaches to understand taste in terms of its cultural and social meanings. Mintz's (1985, 1996) study of power and sweetness in the social history of sugar production and consumption shows that sweetness has deep social and political connotations: 'Sweetness has a privileged position in contrast to the more variable people's attitude toward other tastes in almost all societies' (Mintz 2017, 113). Other scholars argue from an opposite perspective that taste is influenced by social context. Sensory perceptions are neither entirely intrinsic nor extrinsic. Rather, they stem from a combination of personal experiences, memories, social networks, price, information about the production practice and everyday activities of tasting (Lahne & Trubek 2014; Lahne, Trubek, & Pelchat 2014).

In the last decade, some anthropologists have explored the relevance of food in the process of place-making. The sensory aspects of food are considered as part of the construction of senses of place (Sutton 2010, 216). Seremetakis (1994, 29) shows how one's memory of a specific place interlinks with one's senses. Pink's (2008, 181) study of 'slow city movement' contributes an important methodological argument that senses are crucial for both local people in their place-making in everyday life as well as for ethnographers who try to connect to the people and the place where they conduct their field work. The relationship between the senses and place is not given; it is a process in the making in social and historical contexts.

The sensorial place-making theory is further developed in Trubek's (2008) study of food and food-ways in France. Trubek uses the word *terroir*, the taste of place, as the core concept of place-making during the production and consumption of wine and cheese. *Terroir* is related to the local specificity of food. Its literal meanings include 'soil', 'locality' and 'part of the country' (Trubek 2008, 9; Hermansen 2012, 2). When one tastes a certain wine, one senses the place where the grapes were grown and the wine was produced. For the French, *terroir* is a category 'for framing and explaining people's relationship to the land, be it sensual, practical, or habitual' (Trubek 2008, 18). *Terroir* is not merely a gustatory or sensory relationship between people and food; it is related to the nation-state and the globalisation of food production and consumption as well (Trubek 2008, 30). For highly localised foods and beverages, the places where they are produced become unique.

While anthropologists like Trubek keep their focus on elements like soil, climate and landscape represented in food products, they do not include the role of the people in their analysis of sense-based place-making and *terroir*. If *terroir* could be understood as sensorial-based place-making, contesting an 'imagined community' (Hermansen 2012, 4), the locals are as significant as the place in understanding sense-based place-making. Paxson (2010, 2013) digs deeper into the divergent and

diverse meanings of terroir in American cheesemaking. The terroir is not merely in relation to place, but also thickly embedded in the labour, in the artisan's craft and even in the emotions of the cheesemakers. Terroir in this case is culturally produced and consumed. It is not a pre-given quality of a place to be discovered, but something in the making. Instead of looking at how locals or food producers sense a place, Hendrickson (1996, 112) implicitly points out that Mayan export products are imbued with their producers and their places of origin through advertising and consumption in the US. This provides us with a useful perspective to understand how people sense a place at a distance through consumption. Unlike the integrated cultivation, production and marketing of tea in industrialised tea plantations in India (Macfarlane & Macfarlane 2004; Sharma 2009; Besky 2014), the production and marketing of Puer tea are generally separated. Ethnic minorities who cultivate and produce the tea are isolated not only in terms of geography, but also commercially. This results in an image of ethnic minorities as exotic, remote and more in touch with nature compared to urban dwellers.

Inspired by Appadurai's (1996, 178–199) 'Production of Locality', this article reveals the ambiguities and contradictions in the connections among Puer tea and its place of origin, consumers and producers. Appadurai argues that within the nation-state, locality has a phenomenological quality 'constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts' (Appadurai 1996, 178). Certainly, social immediacy helps to produce locality in the Puer tea-growing region, as tea farmers usually share close kinship and relationships across the villages. The forms of interactivity between tea production and consumption also contribute to the production of locality. Direct interactions with tea consumers generate, among the ethnic minorities, a sense of pride over their land and region. Finally, a varying set of contexts, historical, spatial and social, all contribute to the production of locality. Instead of observing the impact of globalisation on nation-states, I will focus on the flows of commodity and the social interactions between people of ethnic minorities who are only partly integrated into the nation-state of China and the majority Han Chinese, and examine the conditions of 'the local'.

Previous anthropological research on Puer tea has mainly focused on an exploration of its historical, political and social meanings as a commodity (Fang 2001; Lin 2008). However, sensation is equally important in understanding Puer tea in terms of its social and economic meanings (Yu 2010, 2016a; Zhang 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2017; Hung 2013, 2015). Inspired by the anthropological study of the senses involving social distinctions, sensorially engaged place-making and the 'production of locality', this article analyses Puer tea's social meanings and the impacts of senses. The class distinction between producers and consumers of Puer tea also provides us with a useful lens to explore the social distinction inherent in the production and consumption of the tea. The specific terroir of the tea comes from the marginalised peoples who inhabit the land and work on it.

Ethnic Minority and Forest Puer Tea

Puer tea was first recorded in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) as ‘Pu cha’. The word ‘Pu’ likely came from *Pu ren* (‘Pu people’), the name of the people who cultivated the tea more than a thousand years ago (Su 2009, 7; Huang 2011). Although the precise genealogy of the term is still debated, a clear and direct link between tea and people is marked from the very beginning. The tea received its final name during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) after the imperial court established Puer County as the centre of its taxation and distribution (Huang 1992, 185; Lin 2008, 306). The periodic discoveries of a number of forest tea trees in Bulang, De’ang, Wa and Hani areas during the last two decades proved that Puer tea is inextricably connected with ethnic minorities. Because of this region’s remoteness, Han Chinese culture only started influencing Puer tea-making techniques after the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 (Hill 1989).

Before the 1990s, Puer tea mainly circulated among ethnic minorities areas as a local beverage. It was not popular in most parts of China. After the Communist Party took over, especially during the Cultural Revolution, tea drinking was condemned in urban areas as ‘negative capitalism’ (Zhang 2014, 19). Puer tea was rarely consumed by city dwellers, and the cultivation and production of tea declined simultaneously (Zhang 2010b, 126–127). The suppression of tea consumption diminished not only the historically positive implications of drinking tea in China, but also deeply affected the livelihood of the Yunnan ethnic minorities who had produced tea for hundreds of years. Many villages replaced their tea gardens with mountain rice, maize and other crops.

The repression of the consumption and cultivation of tea meant that most people in China in that era had never heard about Puer tea. However, a turnaround occurred in the 1970s when the government started promoting the planting of ‘terrace tea’ to increase Puer production and thus bring the local ethnic minorities into socialist modernity (Sturgeon 2005, 41; Hung 2013, 182). Even though this campaign did not target the market, it laid the foundation for the juxtaposition of two types of Puer tea: forest tea and terrace tea.

The new terrace tea was considered advanced, scientific and modern (Hung 2013, 182). Unlike terrace tea, the forest tea trees had been cultivated by local people for as long as anyone could remember. They lacked value in the market, so the ethnic minorities left them to grow naturally, and dense rainforest eventually covered the tea gardens (Hung 2013, 181; Zhang 2014, 128); as the saying goes in this area, ‘From afar, a forest; on looking closer, a tea garden’. After the mid-1990s Puer tea became a fashionable commodity, first in Taiwan, and then in Hong Kong, Guangdong, Yunnan and also Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia (Yu 2016b, 310). However, after the revival of Puer tea, tea sellers, connoisseurs, tea experts and more general consumers considered forest tea trees as the best, most authentic raw material for producing Puer.

Taste, or more generally, the senses, played a very important role in the revaluation of Puer tea in Taiwan in the 1990s. Tea consumption in Taiwan was rooted in the island’s historical context, and in the fact that Taiwan has a flourishing culture of

tea tasting. The authentic taste of aged tea, as described by Taiwanese, should be smooth with diverse aromas and subtle tastes (Yu 2010, 2016a, 2016b). Aged Puer tea is also described in terms of body sensations like *qi* (the circulation of air or energy of the tea) and *yun* (a mixed sensation of the olfactory and taste which causes spiritual pleasure). Moreover, a new generation of urban consumers embraced the Taiwanese tea tradition, which they also helped to transform. The process of re-evaluating traditional tea included public discussion in a wide range of publications on the taste of Puer tea and how to cultivate an appreciation of it (Yu 2010, 135). These publications emphasised the links between the specificities of place and characteristics of taste (Writer 2013).

To learn about the situation in the tea-growing areas, a Taiwanese investigative team trekked through the Six Great Tea Mountains³ from 13 December 1988 to 1 January 1989, where they discovered traditional tea cultivation methods and a large number of forest tea trees (Liao & Hu 2008, 184). Puer tea sellers, connoisseurs and consumers started considering the forest tea trees in Yunnan's rainforest to be 'living fossils' (*huo hua shi*) of tea trees.

Senses and the Consumption of Forest Puer Tea in China

The fashion of drinking 'aged Puer' and exploring its sense caught on in mainland China in the early 2000s. However, the process of re-domesticating Puer tea has shown an appreciation of forest Puer tea. This is not merely because the available stock of aged Puer is nearly exhausted, but also because it is widely believed that only leaves from forest tea trees can be made into certified Puer, after processing and years of storage. Their taste, flavour and overall quality are generally thought to be unbeatable. It should be emphasised here that the social and economic conditions in the post-Mao era in mainland China made the boosting of Puer consumption possible in two aspects. First, consumerism was fully accepted, even if political liberalisation continued to be banned as 'bourgeois' and 'anti-Chinese' (Jaffrelot & van der Veer 2008, 21). Second, the free flow of goods and people in the expanding scale of globalisation made it possible for the middle classes to promote a consumption-based lifestyle in Chinese society. It is the middle classes, either entrepreneurs, officials and intellectuals, white-collar or other high-income professionals (Zhou 2008, 115–116), who are now the consumers of the tea. Drinking Puer tea has become a symbol of refinement.

The preference for forest Puer demonstrates how much people care about both the sensory and cultural significance of tea. Forest Puer tea is considered a healthy and sophisticated beverage which could cultivate one's body. According to my interlocutors in Kunming and other cities, the gustatory, olfactory and somatosensory are key elements in the consumption of forest Puer tea. The most important sensory attributes of the tea are its *huigan* (the return of the sweetness), fragrances, *qi* and *yun*.

As Mr Ding in his fifties from Shanxi Province, whom I met in a tea house in Kunming, put it: 'I like Puer tea because of its amazing *huigan*'. *Hui* means returning.

Gan is the sweetness of the aftertaste following bitterness. It is the taste that comes to the tongue and throat after the bitterness. According to Mr Ding, the taste of *huigan* is in keeping with the Chinese survival philosophy ‘no sweet without sweat’ (*xianku houtian*). He elaborated,

You can only appreciate the pleasure of the sweetness after going through the bitterness of life. When I drink Puer tea, the bitterness reminds me of those tough years when I worked as a construction worker in Kunming, while the *gan* implies that hardwork could be repaid by happiness and success.

For Mr Ding, *huigan* is a reward for suffering. The taste of tea is attached to his life experience. This provides another example of how consumption is related to one’s self-definition and to one’s memories (Lahne & Trubek 2014, 132; Mintz 2017, 120). By choosing to drink forest Puer tea with strong *huigan*, Mr Ding defines himself differently—both from himself in the past and other people. It shows how ‘one could become different by consuming differently’ (Mintz 2017, 120).

Distinct from Mr Ding’s emphasis on the taste of *gan*, other consumers emphasise the variety of fragrances of forest Puer. Miss Hui, a tea seller in Maliandao tea market in Beijing, told me that although she comes from Taiwan and most of her merchandise comprise Taiwanese tea, she likes forest Puer the best. ‘It has lots of aromas, such as flowery, nectar, fruity, camphor, orchid and so on. The amazing fragrances of the tea even lasts on the bottom of the tea cup after you finish drinking’. Many tea sellers and consumers expressed that the ability of sensing and distinguishing the fragrances of Puer tea among consumers is growing. ‘Even if the aromas are nuanced and subtle, one should learn how to sense them, because the fragrances of the tea mean much more than just flavours’. Miss Huang, a Puer tea consumer in Kunming, articulates that the flavours of forest tea come from the good ecological system of the rainforest where the tea trees are growing:

Different flavours of the tea actually do not come from tea trees themselves. Other flowers, trees in the forest tinge the tea leaves with their fragrances. It is the whole environment of the rain forest which endows the tea with different fragrances. When drinking the tea, we are actually enjoying the whole environment. That is why forest Puer tea is now so popular in China.

In addition to its taste and flavours, the sensorial experience of the tea is also valued as reliable assurance of the quality of forest Puer. The *qi*, literally meaning ‘air’, of the Puer tea is seen as the energy of the tea derived from the soil and the long-time accumulation of mineral substances. As Miss Lin, a Puer tea consumer from Zhejiang Province, told me, ‘just imagine it, the roots of the forest tea trees are as high as their trunks. The well-developed roots absorb a lot of mineral substances; it is the mineral substance which endows forest tea with luxuriant taste’. For Miss Lin, the *qi* of forest Puer tea actually symbolises how the old tea trees interact with their surroundings.

These minerals dissolve into water when you infuse the tea. The rich minerals make the tea contain lots of energy, which can produce a benign interaction between the

tea and one's body, you can thus feel the *qi* of the tea. If the tea makes you sweaty when you drink it and burp later, it means the *qi* of the tea is very strong.

The taste of the tea marks its quality. The quicker the conversion from bitterness to sweetness, the longer the sweetness lasts and the stronger the *qi* is, and the higher the quality of the tea. Other senses, like the *yun* of the tea, remain the same in the narrative of consumers and tea sellers. Many tea businessmen and connoisseurs believe that the *yun* of forest Puer is only found among tea trees that are at least 300 years old, situated 2000 metres above sea level, intercropping with tree groves, arbuscles (dwarf trees) and other flowers.

Whether the narrative of the relationship between taste and the environment is in line with scientific evidence or not, these narratives imply the quality, rarity and authenticity of Puer tea. According to my interlocutors in Kunming, another important element that makes the forest tea special is that it is free of fertilisers and pesticides: 'Big tea trees have good resistance to pests and disease. They do not need to be fertilised or treated with pesticides to be able to grow well'. The fact that the middle classes cannot only afford but also appreciate forest Puer reflects their pursuit of a healthier, superior and tasteful lifestyle. Consuming forest Puer tea has become 'a systematic expression of a particular class of condition of existence' (Bourdieu 2013, 170). Choosing forest Puer tea is a means for enhancing distinctiveness for the urban middle classes in mainland China.

Constructing the Terroir of Forest Puer

The prevalent fact that most tea in China is named after its growing place interlinks the particularity of the tea to its original place. In the case of Puer, in addition to being characterised by the main area of its origin, it is said to contain different tastes and flavours depending on the mountain where it grows in each of the three major production areas. Taking Xishuangbanna for example, it is widely viewed among tea sellers and consumers that the tea from Nannuo Mountain has a strong flavour, starting slightly bitter and ending with a very distinctively sweet aftertaste; tea from Bulang Mountain is much more bitter and more astringent, with a thick *huigan*, and is thus more 'stimulating'. The tea from Mengsong Mountain, in contrast, has a richer flavour of honey, orchids and other flowers. Comparing these tea mountains, Yiwu mountain produces the mildest Puer which contains the strongest *qi* and *yun*.

The consumption of forest Puer is thus supported to a great extent by the construction of strong links between origin and taste. This in turn marks each mountain to be a unique place in terms of taste. Mr Chen, a Puer tea connoisseur and businessman based in Kunming, has a determined preference for Puer from Yiwu Mountain: 'I must say that almost all the raw Puer tea from other mountains tastes "passionate and brave" [*gang lie*], while tea from Yiwu [Mountain] is very mild [*rou he*]'.

Tea sellers have branded forest tea from different villages according to its tastes and flavours. For example, the tea cultivated in Laobanzhang, a Hani(Ahka) village on

Bulang Mountain, is considered the best. Almost all Puer tea merchants and consumers that I interviewed described the mellowness and thickness of its taste: 'The taste of the tea has the most harmonious proportion of bitter, sweet, rough and flavourful elements'. The Puer supply areas have been transformed into mosaics of different quality tea and differently valued locales. Each place represents specific senses in the tea cultivated there. Conversely, the senses of the tea become key element for outsiders to imagine the place of its cultivation.

The meaning of *terroir* in a French setting can relate the taste of wine to the place where the grapes are cultivated and the wine is made (Trubek 2008). In the production of Puer in Yunnan, it can be taken one step further: the people who live in the place and produce the tea are part of the *terroir*. It is related to the commercialisation of ethnic minorities in Yunnan. This *terroir* is thus not only natural but also cultural and political. During the post-Mao construction of the multicultural nation-state, China was presented as the fruit of interactions among diverse ethnic groups and regions instead of the monogenetic heirs of the Northern Han, a people initially from the Yellow River region (Friedman 1994; Mueggler 2002). Simultaneously, each ethnic minority, although represented as backward compared to the Han, is understood as a discrete entity with distinctive and colourful customs and traditions (Mueggler 2002, 5), which have become major elements in the narrative of the nation's cultural diversity. The representation and imagination of the minorities thus connect with an appreciation of the beauty and authenticity of their customs (Tan 2001, 2).

Both the local government of Yunnan Province and sub-provincial governments have attempted to connect Puer tea to ethnic minorities. Since April 1993, the local governments of Xishuangbanna, Lincang, Puer City and Yunnan Province have organised a series of 'China Puer Tea Festivals' and 'The International Conference of Puer Tea Culture'. Many of the events promoted a discussion of the relationship between ethnic minorities and Puer tea, giving the impression that the tea 'belongs to' those minorities.

Meanwhile, the local governments have used ethnic culture as a medium to promote Puer tea. For example, every year the local government in Xishuangbanna holds a 'Puer Tea King' (*Puer cha wang*) Competition Festival. Tea farmers and tea companies submit samples of their production to the competition committee, which names the producer of the best-tasting tea as 'Tea King'. The tea competition is often juxtaposed with another festival that exhibits the distinctive dances, songs, costumes and other items which are labelled as the particular customs of the local ethnic minority groups. One cannot attend the competition without encountering this exhibition.

In some cases, ethnic minority festivals have become the auxiliary of Puer tea festivals. When I visited the place where I conducted field work for the first time in 2012, I participated in the first Songkran Festival⁴ in Menghai County, Xishuangbanna. The local government had authorised the festival as the traditional festival of the Bulang people in order to present their traditions. The festival served as a background for the awards ceremony of the Tea King Competition. People from other ethnic minorities, such as Dai, Jinuo and Lahu, had gathered together in the square outside

the factory producing the most famous Puer tea in China, Taetea (Dayi). The square was also crowded with tea merchants and travellers. The head of the county gave an opening speech, followed by dancing and singing by young ethnic minority girls. After the performance, the head of the tea company opened the 'Puer Tea King' ceremony, which lasted the whole morning, with tea farmers in traditional clothing from Bulang, Hani and Lahu villages going up to the stage to accept their awards. At a distance from the stage, a variety of Puer teas were exhibited and served gratis by young Dai and Hani girls. Each bag of tea was tagged with the name of the village where it was produced it. When I talked with Ai Wennan, the former head of Bulang Mountain town, he explained that local government tried to impart to both outsiders and locals the impression that Puer tea is deeply rooted in the traditional societies of ethnic minorities. People like the Bulang, who are believed to have inherited Puer tea from their ancestors, ought to be present at any Puer tea exhibition or competition to legitimise the authenticity of the tea. In this sense, ethnic minorities are understood, consciously or unconsciously, as living proof of the authenticity of Puer tea. The label of Puer tea, the identity of ethnic minorities and the particular relativity constructed in different contexts are means to produce the locality of the region. This locality is 'constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts' (Appadurai 1996, 178). The production of Puer tea terroir and the exoticisation of minority tea producers are therefore conditioned by cultural knowledge. The re-invention of the myth about Puer tea is a bitter metaphor for the re-invention of ethnic minorities' identity in contemporary China, while the *huigan*, however, is rewarded through political and economic gains for the national and local government.

Experiencing the Senses of Puer Tea in Ethnic Minority Areas

Puer tea consumers share the notion that tea from certain places has extraordinary tastes and other senses which are to be found nowhere else. The soil, the climate and the ethnic minorities who live in the same region and cultivate the tea become romanticised in the process of creating a 'terroir' of Puer tea. Many tea sellers and consumers consider visiting tea supply areas to be necessary. A visit would include meeting the ethnic minorities who produce the tea; such an encounter has become an indispensable part of experiencing and appreciating the terroir of the region as well as of its Puer tea.

Tea companies organise tea mountain trips (*cha shan xing*) for their customers in order to experience the senses of forest Puer. A tour group can be as large as one hundred or as small as two or three people, yet there are many similarities in their activities: visiting forests with Puer tea trees, observing the process of tea production and experiencing the cultures and surroundings of the ethnic minorities.

Mr Li, the proprietor of a Puer tea company, invited four of his customers to Puer tea's growing region in 2010 to demonstrate how raw material from different places enables divergent senses in tea products. After their visit, Mr Li realised that it had

helped his customers to acquire the capability to distinguish and to appreciate the different tastes and flavours of Puer. Since 2010, like many other Puer companies in Yunnan, Mr Li's company has organised tea mountains trips every spring and autumn.

In the spring of 2014, his company organised a five-day tea mountains trip. After his guests arrived, Mr Li advised that there was no need to hurry in learning to distinguish different tastes—they would become clear at each destination: 'After you go into the tea forests, smell the wild flowers, visit the forest tea trees, observe how the tea farmers process the tea and, only then, will you be aware of the hierarchical taxonomy of Puer taste'. According to Mr Li, the tea's forest, villages and mountains represent and are responsible for its special taste and authenticity.

In the following days, the tour group visited Laobanzhang village in Bulang Mountain and Banpo village in Nannuo Mountain. These visits have generated unanticipated insights, even revelations, in many participants. For example, Mrs Kang, a retired high school teacher, divulged,

I have been drinking tea for more than thirty years, but I never thought Puer was so amazing before I came here. Just as my friend told me, you will never know the fascination of the tea if you do not go to the tea mountains. Now I understand why one should come to the mountain to know what the Puer feels like.

Similarly, Miss Zhou, a tea seller from Henan Province, was inspired by the nature of the tea forest:

The urban environment is incomparable to the forest. When you are surrounded by green, the only things you can feel are nature and peace. The tea trees have grown there for almost a thousand years; can you believe that?! When you look at it, you can feel time and space, and all these will transform into a cup of tea, is it not marvellous?

On each day of the tour, Mr Li would ask a local family to show his guests how the tea is stir-fried and rubbed while Mr Li explained every step of the process, stressing how different rubbing methods could produce different tastes: 'Tea from Bulang Mountain is more bitter because it is rubbed harder, while tea from Nannuo Mountain tastes softer and contains more flavours because it is lightly rubbed'. The terroir is created not only through sensing nature, but also through showcasing the practices of the producers (Lahne & Trubek 2014, 133). By discussing differences rather than similarities in the tastes of the teas, Mr Li enabled the perception in the participants of distinguishable tastes and flavours connected to people and places.

As the quality, taste and authenticity of the tea are measured by its place, for tea consumers the purpose of going to the tea mountains is to gain a full experience of the tea:

Besides participating in tea making, I insist on organising dinner for my guests every day in ethnic minority villages. It is as important as visiting the tea forests. By eating their food, my guests will also gain a sense of the culture of ethnic minorities.

Strikingly, on the last day, the family providing the dinner for the tour group hosted a bonfire party for them. Five young female Hani villagers first performed a traditional

Hani dance for the group. They were dressed in Hani festival clothes decorated with embroidered patterns, silver jewellery and colourful feathers. Then all the guests were invited to dance in a circle around the fire. Even though such a scene is exceedingly familiar in any ethnic tourist sites in China, Mr Li said that participation in this party would be an extraordinary experience for his guests: ‘This is real ethnic culture. It is difficult to participate in such an event in any ethnic tourist site’.

The tea mountains trip could be understood as ethnic tourism. Just as Mr Li said, these trips are very attractive to urban people because most of the tea villages are nestled in deep forests in the mountains of southern Yunnan, which are considered natural or even timeless places. The remoteness of such places provides an additional attraction to those tea consumers and sellers who are seeking nature and an escape from urban life. Tourism within China is promoted by the government as part of a new lifestyle that stimulates both economic growth in rural areas and urban middle-class consumption (Notar 2006; Oakes 2016). Tea mountains trips are total experiences that bring middle-class consumers to the places of production, combining the exoticism of ethnic minorities with the marketing and consumption of Puer tea. By observing the life of the minorities who cultivate the tea, tea customers have confirmed that the people are intrinsic to the tea and its terroir. The sensorial production of place, therefore, constructs the alterity between the urban middle classes and the rural ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

The sensation of drinking tea goes far beyond bodily reaction. The *huigan*, fragrances, *qi*, *yun* and other senses of tea are attached to Han Chinese understandings of life and self. For the urban middle classes, drinking Puer tea is not only a quotidian consumption, but also the pursuit of a new lifestyle. The connection between the senses of the tea and its place of origin means that its quality and authenticity are intrinsically connected to place. This linkage also shows how the people who belong to the place are imagined, romanticised and narrated by tea sellers, consumers and connoisseurs. For tea sellers and consumers, visiting the origins of Puer tea has become an indispensable way of consuming and appreciating it. These tea mountain trips contribute to their understanding of terroir and their imagination of ethnic minorities. Their preference for forest Puer tea is thus confirmed, enhanced and vindicated over and over again. For ethnic minorities, their increasingly important role in cultivating, producing and trading this highly valued tea has enhanced their social status in Chinese society and reinforced their ethnic identity (Sturgeon 2012, 126).

The terroir of Puer tea is made special to consumers through their imagination of the producers. Firstly, this terroir is economic and political. The production and consumption of Puer tea have existed for a long time, but it was after the ‘Reform and Opening-Up’ program that the revival of the market in Puer started. What makes it more historically unique is that the revival of this consumption started in Taiwan and particularly emphasised body sensations. The appreciation of sensorial aspects

of Puer tea was essential in the revival of Puer tea consumption in mainland China, and has persisted as an intrinsic part of the commoditisation and consumption of the tea. Secondly, this terroir is not only natural but also cultural. The sensorial characteristics of the tea have become attached to the natural and ecological environment of the forest tea trees. The dominant Han Chinese imagination of ethnic minorities, coupled with the fact that the tea was promoted by the Chinese government as a tool for developing upland minorities, made the terroir cultural and political. Ultimately, this terroir is inextricably linked with people. Ethnic minorities have played an indispensable role in the historical formation of the tea. They now strongly influence the way that the urban middle classes trace back the sensation of the tea to its place of origin. The inclusion of people in the terroir makes Puer special to consumers.

The cultural flow of the sensorial experience has become an important dimension of globalisation (Yu 2016b, 319). The production, distribution and consumption of Puer tea have produced not only a powerful and modern market, but also a sense of locality, cross-cultural communication and new experiences. The locality of ethnic minority areas has been produced and will continue to be re-produced through the direct interactions between urban elites and ethnic minorities. In this sense, Puer tea provides us with a special lens to understand the production of locality, as argued by Appadurai (1996, 186), which is inevitably generated by the relationship between the contexts that 'neighbourhoods' create and those they encounter. The ethnic minorities that produce Puer tea give it its added cachet today as organic and natural, mainly because its growing region has a natural, ecological, even wild aura. While the flow of Puer tea and the sensorial experience of drinking it become more and more globalised, the ethnic minorities who produce it are still viewed pejoratively—in China—as autochthonous and emplaced and, therefore, disconnected from the rest of the world.

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Notes

- [1] In January 2007, the southern Yunnan city Simao, whose old town is thought to have been the centre of the distribution and taxation of Puer tea, changed its name to Puer City.
- [2] Tea Mountains is not a geographical name; it refers collectively to the mountains where Puer tea is cultivated.
- [3] According to *Puer cha ji* [Record of Puer Tea], *Yunnan zhi* [Record of Yunnan] and other historical documents, the Six Great Tea Mountains are Gedeng, Mangzhi, Manzhuan, Yibang, Youle and Yiwu.
- [4] Songkran Festival is known in Chinese as the ‘Water-Splashing Festival’ (*po shui jie*). It is celebrated in Theravada Buddhist regions of Southeast Asia as well as Xishuangbanna and Dehong in Yunnan, where Theravada Buddhism is practised as the principal religion. Historically, Dai, Bulang and De’ang people celebrated the festival around the middle of April. In order to make a distinction between Dai and Bulang, Songkran Festival was authorised as the official New Year for Bulang people in 2012 by the local government of Xishuangbanna, while *po shui jie* remains the official festival of Dai people.

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