

# UNCERTAINTY, RISK, AND MERIT-MAKING

## Tea Economy and Religious Practices in a Southern Yunnan Bulang Community

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**Abstract:** The rising importance of the tea business among the Bulang people of Yunnan province, Southwest China, is intimately linked to Theravada Buddhist ideologies and practices. Non-reciprocal merit-making provides a sense of control, and this is particularly important in an increasingly uncertain economic environment. More and more people were ready to engage in high-risk trading, and new rituals emerged precisely at a time when profit margins increased rapidly. The reinvention of local rituals helped people to control risk-taking and to morally legitimize ambiguous market behavior. The result is strong synergies between the ways uncertainty and risk are being addressed in the tea economy and in local religious practice: economic processes are changing religious practices just as much as religious practices are making a difference in economic behavior.

**Keywords:** Bulang people, gift-giving, merit-making, Pu'er tea, risk, Theravada Buddhism, uncertainty

Since the early 2000s, the rapid growth of the market for Pu'er tea has profoundly changed the economic conditions of many ethnic minority communities in the highlands of southern Yunnan. Numerous villages have abandoned subsistence agriculture and have instead expanded commercial tea plantations. Cash cropping, tea processing, and tea trading mark the most striking economic changes these communities have experienced over the past half-century.<sup>1</sup> As the tea market has penetrated further into their communities, it closely interacts with their religious beliefs and practices.

In this article, I take the situation of the Bulang—one of the officially recognized ethnic minorities living in the uplands of Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna)



Dai Autonomous Prefecture in southern Yunnan—as an example of the interplay between the market economy and religious piety. With the rapid growth of the tea economy, many Bulang communities have become collectively much richer than they were during the preceding period of self-contained swidden agriculture. However, with prosperity, the market also brought risks, confirming Ulrich Beck's (1992: 19) observation that “the social production of *wealth* is systematically accompanied by the social production of *risks*.” Both concepts, wealth and risk, therefore have to be examined together. Upon closer examination, risk-taking is not the only factor that makes the tea business tricky for Bulang people. There are also uncertainties embedded in the tea market. While elevated risks are occasionally and voluntarily assumed by Bulang people when struggling for a higher income on the periphery of the Chinese tea market, uncertainties are perennial and inherent to the market. Both generate a sense of anxiety in Bulang communities.

Most notably, the economic transformation has coincided with lavish religious giving. The Bulang have been building more conspicuous temples and sponsoring lavish rituals in order to accumulate more merit. If we account for religious practices in Theravada Buddhist communities that directly interact with the economy (Keyes 1983; O'Connor 1986; Pfanner and Ingersoll 1962; Spiro 1966, 1982; Tan Leshan 2005; Wilson 1985), wealth and risk/uncertainty are part of a triangular, not just dyadic, interaction. The social production of wealth, the risk/uncertainty of the market, and religious practices could be considered in the form of a triangle: the three vertices of this triangle are linked by the concept of meritorious gift-giving that is inherent to the logic of Theravada Buddhist merit-making. In contemporary Bulang communities, giving cash, raw materials, and life necessities to monks and temples and sponsoring rituals are prevalent forms of gift-giving. The accumulation of merit is a delayed ‘return’ on one’s gift-giving, and depends on the donation amount.<sup>2</sup> Meritorious gift-giving is one of the most important ways for Bulang people to guarantee their future well-being. Through analyzing the practice of gift-giving, we can see how wealth, risk/uncertainty, and religion are inextricably intertwined and, more importantly, how this has shaped the recent changes in Bulang society.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is twofold. First, it teases out the relationship between the uncertainties faced by the Bulang people in the Pu'er tea market and the risks they take in trading tea. Uncertainties and risks are concurrent yet distinct. The differences between them in the Bulang people’s tea business are revealed in two ways. First, uncertainties are embedded in both individual and communal tea businesses because of the ambiguities of the quality of the tea and the fluctuations in its price, while risks are intentionally taken on by individuals who chase higher profit. Second, uncertainties are incalculable and often unpredictable, while risks have been carefully calculated and are controlled at a manageable level.

Second, the article addresses the question of how the ideology of merit and the actions of merit-making interact with the market economy, especially in the unregulated Pu'er tea trade. For Bulang tea farmers and middlemen, as practicing Theravada Buddhists, the religious concepts of karma and merit provide a powerful ideology for comprehending the tea market. Following Nicolas Sihlé's (2015) analysis of non-reciprocal Buddhist donations, I argue that while donations made by the Bulang people are not reciprocal in a strictly Maussian way, the 'return' of merit as a kind of blessing does help them cope with the anxiety brought on by the uncertainty of the market on which they rely, giving them a sense of control.

In sum, this article illuminates aspects of the relationship between economic behavior and religious practice, illustrating how economic growth and religion influence each other. In the Bulang people's case, economic growth is intertwined with religious practices not only through the concept of merit-making, but also through the power of religion to help manage moral crises. The article first lays out the background of the Bulang people and the Pu'er tea economy. By looking closely at how the Bulang themselves comprehend and experience the tea market, the next section shows how uncertainties and risks have been embedded in both individual and communal tea businesses. Bridging the Buddhist ideology of merit and the broader concept of blessing, the third section demonstrates how Bulang people cope with the anxieties caused by uncertainties and risk-taking in the market through practices of merit-making and blessing-seeking. The last section delineates how Bulang villagers reinvented a ritual that keeps risk-taking behaviors in the tea trade at a manageable level and fosters a sense of moral community. In this way, the market has transformed the Bulang people's religious practices.

## **The Bulang and the Pu'er Tea Economy**

The Bulang nationality (*Bulang zu*) is an officially recognized ethnic minority (*shaoshuminzu*) in China. Although this group is tiny compared to most other ethnic minorities in China, with only 119,639 people,<sup>3</sup> it is dispersed throughout the highlands across southern and southwestern Yunnan. While Bulang people share a history with the officially recognized Wa and De'ang (Ang or Palaung) (Bulang Zu Jian Shi Bian Ji Zu 1984: 2; Li Daoyong et al. 1986: 2), the national ethnic classification system in China has successfully constructed them as an independent ethnic minority with a unique culture.

In China, more than 60 percent of Bulang people live on Bulangshan (Bulang Mountain)—a mountain that has become renowned for its Pu'er tea—in Menghai County, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. Historically, Bulang communities in Xishuangbanna belonged to the Dai Kingdom, which reigned

over 12 *panna* (administrative subdivisions) from its capital in Jinghong. All the villages on Bulangshan were thus under the control of the *cao phaendin*, the Dai king, known as ‘Lord of the Earth’. For a long time, Bulangshan was peripheral to both Theravada Buddhist-dominated mainland Southeast Asia and Han-dominated China. Geographic remoteness and political marginalization resulted in economic underdevelopment in the region well into the early 2000s.

Many scholars have assumed that Theravada Buddhism is a lowland religion practiced by the ‘civilized’ Dai, Tai, Shan, Burmese, and Laotians across the valleys of Southeast Asia (Leach 1960: 52; Scott 2009: 21; Sihlé and Ladwig 2017: 119; Tannenbaum and Kammerer 1996: 8). The Bulang, including some of the closely related Wa and De’ang peoples, are exceptional among highland groups in also following the fundamental teachings and ritual standards of this religion (Borchert 2017: 53; Liu 2015; Walker 2003: 201). The Bulang are the second-largest ethnic minority in China to follow this religion, after the Dai.

The Theravada Buddhist tradition spread to Bulang communities mainly from their lowland neighbor Dai. In contemporary Bulang and Dai communities in Xishuangbanna, *dan*, a form of giving, is the foremost and the most frequent Theravada Buddhist practice to gain merit. The word *dan* is directly derived from the Pāli word *dāna*, a practice shared in one form or another in all Theravada Buddhist societies. For the Bulang and Dai in Xishuangbanna, it encompasses all activities that involve meritorious giving, whether ritualistic or non-ritualistic. Ritualistic *dan* tends to be held at specific times for specific reasons, such as on Sangkan (new year), at the beginning and end of Vassa (rain retreat), and on the new and full moon. Other *dan* activities are not necessarily ritualistic, for example, supporting the livelihood of monks or contributing to the construction or renovation of temples and pagodas. It is considered one of the most meritorious actions in Xishuangbanna (Tan Leshan 2005: 76).

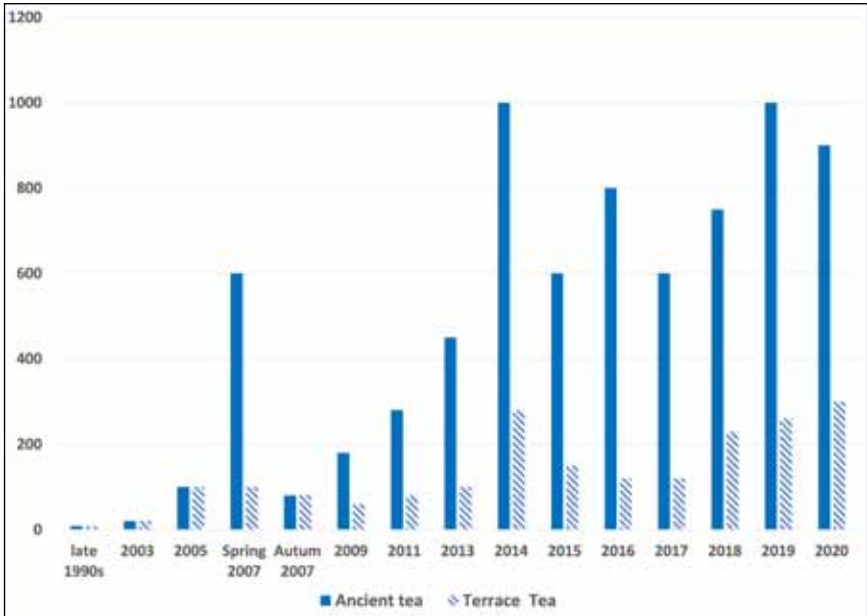
Besides being pious Theravada Buddhists, the most well-known feature of the Bulang people is that they have a long tradition of planting tea. The tea they cultivate is Pu’er, a special variety grown along the upper reaches of the Mekong River. In the late 1990s, Taiwanese tea merchants started to popularize the drinking of Pu’er tea. This fashion then spread to mainland China, Japan, Korea, North America, and Europe (Hung 2015: 14; Yu 2016; Zhang 2014). Simultaneously, Pu’er tea made from the leaves of ancient tea trees was labeled ‘premium organic’ because it is free of chemical fertilizers and herbicides. This, coupled with its time-honored cultivation methods and the scarcity of places where it can be grown, has made ancient Pu’er tea one of the most valuable teas in China and beyond since the late 2000s.

As ancient Pu’er tea became sought after by consumers, connoisseurs, and merchants, many Bulang villages in Bulangshan experienced rapid marketization. The village of Man,<sup>4</sup> which is nestled on a relatively flat side of the tall

Bulangshan, was the main field site of this research. Although tea has been grown here for hundreds of years, it was economically insignificant until the 2000s, when it replaced swidden agriculture as villagers' main livelihood. Eager to stimulate the earnings of the impoverished upland ethnic minorities, both local and provincial governments helped to develop new tea gardens. After tea planting campaigns started in 2000, the landscape as well as the livelihood of Man village changed dramatically. From 2000 to 2003, the Pu'er tea campaign saw more than 1,600 mu (1 mu is approximately 1/6 acre) of Pu'er tea planted in the village's surrounding peaks. Tea has become the village's monocrop since 2012.

However, the governments' aid strategies are in conflict with market demand. This discordance has created dilemmas for Bulang tea businesses. The tea trees provided by the governments are terrace tea, a variety that is different from the ancient tea trees that have grown for centuries in the village. In Man village, terrace tea is called *na ai*, which means 'small tea', while ancient tea is called *na huang*, or 'big tea'. The reason behind this taxonomy is that ancient tea trees became massive because villagers let them grow naturally, while terrace tea is regularly trimmed to be kept as bushes for ease of picking and maximizing yields. The distinction between ancient and terrace not only pertains to the relative height of the tea trees but also represents the cultural and economic values of the two kinds of Pu'er tea. Ancient Pu'er tea is considered by tea merchants and connoisseurs to be superior to terrace tea because of its organic aura and its taste (Hung 2013; Ma 2018; Zhang 2014).

In the urban tea market, especially since the late 2000s, Pu'er tea's value depends on the age of the tree: the older the tree, the higher the market price of its tea. The price of ancient tea produced in Man village reached ¥1,000/kg (1 Chinese yuan approximates 0.15 US dollars) in 2014. The average annual cash income of households has soared from less than ¥1,000 in the early 2000s to around ¥50,000 in the late 2010s. However, since villagers ceased growing other crops in 2012, they now have to buy the food they had previously grown. At the same time, inflation diminishes the buying power of their cash. Moreover, the incompatibility between the modern tea market and the governments' cash crop campaign has created a problem for Bulang people—a high yield of terrace tea with a meager price and a low yield of ancient tea with a skyrocketing price. This unbalanced pricing, coupled with the unregulated and highly ambiguous system of quality evaluation, makes people in Man village, as well as many upland villages which rely on the tea, vulnerable in three ways. First, the methods used to evaluate the Pu'er tea market are primarily based on a sensorial system defined and dominated by Han Chinese with which most Bulang people are not familiar. Second, price fluctuations are out of their control (see fig. 1). Villagers tend to wait for a higher price for their ancient tea; however, they could end up not selling their tea at all, especially in autumn. Third, although forest



**FIGURE 1:** Highest price (in ¥/kg) of ancient Pu'er tea and highest price of terrace Pu'er tea in Man village from the late 1990s to 2020. Source: Author's interviews with villagers on tea prices.

tea fetches a much higher price than terrace tea, ancient tea constitutes only about 20 percent of the village of Man's total tea yield and cannot be increased. Villagers thus often take the risk of selling adulterated ancient tea to increase their income. This puts the reputation of their ancient tea and their long-term business opportunities at risk.

## Encountering Uncertainties and Taking Risks

Ever since the price of Pu'er tea surged to over ¥500/kg in 2007, many young male villagers have started acting as intermediaries between their home village of Man and the outside market, whose closest representatives are in nearby valley towns. These local middlemen are the most directly engaged in the market and have become the front line in encountering uncertainties and taking risks. Zhang, like many of his peers, joined the tea market in 2008, not long after the Pu'er tea bubble burst in the late spring of 2007.<sup>5</sup> He invited one of his friends who runs a wholesale tea shop in Dali City (in western Yunnan) to come to his village and try some samples of their tea. His friend then asked him to collect 1 ton of tea and deliver it to Dali. Zhang's friend had agreed to pay

¥105/kg at that time, but when he delivered 1 ton of tea to her, she reneged on her promise and gave him an ultimatum to either accept ¥80/kg or she would not buy the tea at all. The reason she gave was that the quality of Zhang's tea was not as good as the sample she had tried. Zhang persuaded his friend to buy 300 kg of his tea for ¥90/kg. Endeavoring to find a buyer willing to pay more than ¥95/kg, which was the average price of the tea he had collected in his village, Zhang finally sold 400 kg of his remaining stock to a Dai middleman for ¥98/kg and transported the remaining 300 kg back to his home. The money Zhang got from selling the tea was ¥29,800 less than the money he needed to pay the families from whom he had collected the tea. Including transportation costs, he lost more than ¥30,000 in that single trade.

Disputes like the one between Zhang and his friend over the quality of Pu'er tea are ubiquitous in the trade. This was not caused by mistrust but brought about by the ambiguity of the sensorial evaluation system in the Pu'er tea trade employed by Han tea traders since the late 2000s. The evaluation of ancient Pu'er tea is based on two interrelated factors, namely, the age of the tea trees and the taste of the tea (Ma 2018: 324). Since the age of the tea trees cannot be verified, tea traders overwhelmingly employ bodily perceptions such as taste and aftertaste as the most crucial elements for appraising the tea's quality. Sensorial perceptions of ancient Pu'er tea vary, however, depending on how a variety of environmental factors in the tea's place of origin impacts the tea. For example, the soil, the altitude, and other conditions change the chemical properties that influence the aroma, sweetness, or bitterness of the tea. Additionally, several elements in the process of making tea affect the taste, which is highly variable; these include factors such as picking method, roasting time, and techniques employed during rubbing and desiccating. Moreover, given that the conclusions of sensorial evaluation are highly dependent on an individual's preferences, the judgments of the tea's quality are somewhat erratic.

Pu'er tea's ambiguous evaluation system is hard to learn and apply even for experienced tea businesspeople. Neophytes, like Zhang in 2008, are in completely uncertain territory when they enter the tea business: "I still believe that the tea I collected for my friend was as good as the sample she tried. But the way she explained it to me made me feel she was not unreasonable. I am still puzzled by how to successfully sell tea, even after so many years of learning to sense the taste of Pu'er tea." Many of Zhang's peers share this ambivalent feeling. Zai, another tea middleman, expressed his feelings of confusion: "Sometimes I was worried that the tea I collected was not good enough, but it turned out that tea merchants liked it very much. Conversely, sometimes I was very proud of my tea, but tea bosses complained that the tea was either too bitter, too strong, or too light, or had an uncooked [*sheng wei*] or smoky taste [*yan wei*]. It is just difficult to know." To Bulang people, successfully selling tea is a result of unknown contingencies.

Many households and middlemen also experienced turbulence in their tea business because of the uncertain fluctuating price. Kan, a Bulang man in his early fifties, articulated his experience: “Last spring [the spring of 2014], we made around 50 kg of ancient tea. My family wanted to sell when the price surged to ¥1000/kg, but I wanted to wait because I overheard from my friends who are doing tea business in Menghai town that the price of the ancient tea in our village would increase even more. However, it dropped to ¥800/kg in a few days, then to ¥500/kg at the end of the spring, and finally to ¥100/kg during the rainy season. We ended up selling it together with the tea we harvested in the autumn at ¥400/kg.” In the Pu’er tea market, the ever-changing taste of the tea and the ever-changing price of the tea put all participants in positions of uncertainty.<sup>6</sup>

For the Bulang, engaging in the tea business means not only encountering uncertainty—a situation of unknowing created by lack of information and market disorder—but also taking risks generated by the competitive Pu’er tea market. As one of the most sought-after teas in China, ancient Pu’er tea has surpassed the status of an ordinary beverage. Obsessed with the authenticity of the tea, many consumers trace its taste, aroma, and other sensorial attributes back to its place of origin (Ma 2018). Ancient tea provides less than a quarter of Man’s tea yield, yet it elevates the reputation of all the tea from the village. Villagers are faced with a dilemma: they can mix ancient tea with terrace tea for a higher income while risking the reputation of their village tea, or they can earn a much lower income but preserve the reputation of their village tea.

In 2014, when the price of ancient tea in Man village surged to ¥1,000/kg while terrace tea reached only ¥280/kg, many households and middlemen there started to blend ancient tea with terrace tea to raise their profit margins. While adulterating tea may jeopardize both the reputation of their village tea and the credibility of their business, villagers prioritized a higher income by taking risks, especially since the risk is conditional to discovery by tea merchants. “If we don’t mix terrace tea into ancient tea and sell it as ancient tea, it is not enough for living expenses. We don’t plant anything else now. Tea is everything,” Bing, a Bulang woman in her early thirties, explained. “We do it very carefully. Nobody would notice if you mix 5kg of terrace tea into 20kg of ancient tea.” Bing’s husband Guang added: “If you mix 5kg of terrace tea into 5kg of ancient tea, then you should never think about selling it as ancient tea.”

The experiences of Zhang, Kan’s family, and Bing’s family illustrate the difference between ‘uncertainty and risk’ (Brown 2015) in a capitalist economy. Uncertainty is unknown and immeasurable while risk is measurable (Knight [1921] 2006: 19–20). As Bulang villagers are at the production end of the tea trade, with little access to information on the consumer end of the tea market, uncertainty is embedded in their business. Risk, conversely, is predictable and calculated. “You have to be careful and not greedy when mixing terrace tea



into ancient tea,” Yu, a Bulang middleman, explained. “Not all terrace tea is appropriate for blending. You have to use the best terrace tea, which looks very similar to ancient tea.” Many villagers, especially young and middle-aged men such as Yu, take intentional risks to pursue a higher income when mediating between the village and the outside market. However, short-term income is not the only factor Bulang people consider in their tea business. For example, they will not adulterate ancient tea when selling it to a long-term business partner. Therefore, risk is weighed against the specific pros and cons of its context.

The case of the tea business among the Bulang people provides nuanced glimpses into characteristics of uncertainty and risk in market economies. First, uncertainty and risk occur simultaneously in Bulang people’s experience. This runs counter to the arguments that uncertainty is crucial to capitalism’s growth only at the very beginning, and that after the “capitalism machine” has routinized its automatic growth and evolution, the calculation of risk dissolves uncertainty (Appadurai 2013: 238). Second, uncertainty often brings major loss to businesses, as in the cases of Zhang and Kan. Uncertainty thus remains a constant danger and is never seen by the Bulang as the basis of profit, as it is in neo-classical economics where profit is a reward for facing uncertainty (cf. Knight ([1921] 2006: 362–363; see also Brouwer 2002: 93). Third, forms of uncertainty and forms of risk are manifested differently in Bulang people’s tea economy. The uncertainties Bulang people encounter in the marketization of Pu’er tea could be considered as ‘embodied uncertainty’, defined by Sword-Daniels et al. (2018: 296–298) as both a conscious and an unconscious lack of certainty. From individual tea middlemen through families to communities, embodied uncertainty is directly felt; it is constantly contextualized and enacted through various lived experiences of Bulang people. Uncertainty was shared in Bulang society before and after mass marketization became a part of their communities, yet risks and risk-taking actions were less common before marketization. Both individuals and communities intentionally take on risks for higher profit in this rapidly changing market economy—similar to what Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) have described for modernity in general.

Just because Man villagers have been adulterating tea does not mean they think this is a foolproof strategy. They are aware of the danger of adulterating ancient tea. However, families who possess only a small portion of an ancient tea garden have no better option but to carefully calculate in order to find a balance between higher profit and endangering their tea business. Some villagers expressed their discontent with this practice, concerned that it might damage the reputation of all the tea in their village. Risk-taking in tea business has created a palpable shared anxiety.

This anxiety arises from the connection between the tea business and clan affiliation. Traditionally, the Bulang have strong bonds with their clan (*ga gun*) (Yunnan Sheng Bian Ji Zu 1986: 21). Although Bulang communities have

changed in many ways since they were classified as a national ethnic group in 1964, the lineage-based affiliation is still very strong. Man village has eight clans, and although they are independent of one another, inter-clan marital relations link them together. In the tea business, sales depend largely on kin. All tea middlemen in the village collect treated loose tea leaves not exclusively but overwhelmingly from their relatives. Therefore, when one middleman takes risks, all the families connected to his family take on liability as well. When one family adulterates ancient tea with terrace tea, many middlemen's businesses may be put at risk. Religious beliefs and practices help villagers cope with the anxiety brought about by these uncertainties and risks.

### Meritorious Gift-Giving and the Uncertainty of the Market

The expansion of the precarious Pu'er tea market has created constant anxiety for young and middle-aged Bulang men. Although the Buddhist ideology and acts of merit-making cannot reduce the market's external uncertainties and risks, they do provide powerful shock absorbers for the Bulang, who practice Theravada Buddhism and worship spirit cults. The Bulang ideology of merit is complicated by the broader concept of blessing, which is especially influential among lay Bulang since they, like the neighboring Shan/Dai (Tannenbaum 1996: 191), do not systematically separate the Buddhist notion of merit from the broader idea of blessing. Both are referred to in the Bulang language as *wen/bon*, a syncretic concept.<sup>7</sup> Although blessing often relates to powerful beings while merit is seen as the return for offerings to monastics (ibid.: 187–191), both involve making offerings to the Buddha as the most powerful being (ibid.: 187). Sponsoring a Buddhist ritual is a way of gaining the Buddha's blessing for those Bulang middlemen whose financial situations are out of their control.

With limited information and knowledge to contextualize the 'logic' of the tea trade, Zhang, the man we encountered in the previous section, turned to his beliefs to explain his failure: "It was because of bad karma—there is no other explanation for it." Buddhist ideology has become a way for people like Zhang to comprehend their experiences when confronted with uncertainty. Phyo Pyi Kyaw (2017: 307) shows that in Burmese Theravada Buddhist communities, people explicitly represent the high and low points of their lives as the result of karma, and that karma can always provide an explanation for either failure or success. In the modern tea business, persistent and inherent uncertainties leave a vacuum of 'knowing' within which such religious interpretations continue to be relevant. As a pious Theravada Buddhist, Zhang thus ascribes the failure of his business endeavor to bad karma.

With his limited savings, Zhang sponsored a *dan* ritual in 2008 together with three other families as part of the Khao Vassa ceremony in his village, which

marks the beginning of the monsoon rains. He invited the abbot of his village's temple, and monks from nearby villages chanted Buddhist sutras in his house for 24 hours. As Zhang explained: "I had been ordained as a monk for 15 years. This [unsuccessful sale] was the biggest failure I have experienced since I disrobed. It felt like I should do something." His compulsion to 'do something' about his bad karma and his choice of sponsoring a *dan* ritual are deeply rooted both in his Theravada karmic theory and the ideology of blessing-seeking. Zhang later conveyed: "I still owe lots of money to my relatives and friends. It feels like eating a piece of burning coal! I have dreamt many times that a big tree is falling over me." Zhang's merit-making activity is similar to the ways in which people across Southeast Asia seek blessing, which tends to be preventive. In Nicola Tannenbaum's (1996: 186) formulation, it "does not aim to cause good things to happen, but to prevent bad things from happening." Even if it just provides added protection, merit-making thus offers a limited possibility of agency in the face of uncertainty.

Zhang is not the only tea trader to sponsor *dan* rituals to allay his anxiety caused by mercantile pursuit. En, a Bulang man who had been engaged in the tea business for four years, donated ¥20,000 to the restoration of his village's temple in 2016. He explained: "To be able to successfully make some money in the tea business, you need only 30 percent knowledge. For the rest, you can only rely on your luck. For us Bulang, the only one who can bring us good fortune is Buddha." En thus co-opted the gaining of merit through religious expenditures to aid in his participation in the market.

Bulang middlemen's response to the uncertainties of their business parallels how Indonesian migrants handle their migration-related uncertainty through 'acts of faith'. The concepts of the will of God and fate are of great importance to them in overcoming the fear associated with their hazardous journeys (Bastide 2015). The connection between an uncertain economy and religious practices exists in a broader context, as, for example, among Buryat people, who also employ a spiritual approach by sponsoring shamanist rituals to avoid possible misfortunes as a result of an uncertain economy (Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 134). By sponsoring the *dan* rituals, Bulang middlemen turn the anxieties brought about by tea trade into a constructive engagement with religious activities.

This resonates the 'cash-merit' relationship, defined and employed by Gareth Fisher (2008: 150). Teasing out the relationship between cash-giving and merit-gaining, he articulates that more money does not necessarily reward the donor with greater merit, but it gives the donor greater protection in many aspects of his/her life (ibid.: 151). The interplay between market activities and religious beliefs in Bulang communities is more complicated because the cash-merit relationship manifests as a 'cash-merit-cash' circle. Bulang people believe that their accumulated merit through donation will protect their tea business and potentially reward them with more cash, which will secure more donations.

In recent years, the village of Man has spent lavishly on its temples. In 2012, the village built a new grand prayer hall. This was followed by two more big projects: renovating the pavilion at the temple's main entrance in 2013 and 2014, and rebuilding the temple's old worship hall in 2015. The following year, the village started renovating the monks' dormitories and kitchen, and, in November 2016, before that project was completed, the pagoda was revamped. In 2018, the village spent ¥90,000 to import a giant Buddha statue and two sculptures from Thailand.

According to the abbot of the village temple, although the precise total cost of this recent construction and rebuilding is unclear, it is estimated that more than ¥3,000,000 has been spent on these projects. Three procedures made these works possible: apportionment, land lease, and voluntary donations. Each time the construction had insufficient funds, the temple committee made a rough budget and then apportioned it among all the households. The standard model is that the committee decides how much each household should contribute and what individual members of each household should donate. In addition to their apportioned expenditures, some individuals, families, and groups of households voluntarily donated as much as they could. Over seven years of intensive construction, the average household's donation reached ¥40,000.<sup>8</sup>

For the villagers of Man, this generous religious giving has two ends: accumulating merit and gaining blessing. Building a temple or a pagoda is the most meritorious Buddhist action in upper Myanmar and Thailand (Nash 1965: 116; Spiro 1982: 109; Tambiah 1968: 69; 1970: 147), and in central Thailand it is second only to ordinating as a monk (Kaufman 1977: 183–184). In Man village, likewise, supporting the construction of Buddhist temples and pagodas has become more and more important for lay people, as one villager articulated: “The merit you gain from building temples is demonstrated by the temple itself. It is good for Buddhism because people have a nice place to do all kinds of good deeds.”

In today's Bulang communities, people have yet another reason for generosity in religious giving. On the one hand, most Bulang believe that hard work and thrift will raise them up; on the other hand, they also adhere to the idea that the wealth they accumulate is the fruit of accumulated merit. As Bu, a Bulang man who was the head of the temple committee in 2015, explained: “Our village is facing both challenges and opportunities. Many people have made lots of money from tea business, but we worry a lot [*hen bu fang xin*]. I remember two decades ago, the price of tea in our village was extremely low. It was considered old coarse tea [*lao cu cha*], which was lower than the lowest grade of tea. They called it grade-less tea [*ji wai cha*].<sup>9</sup> Who knows how the tea market will change in the next 5 or 10 years?” Many villagers, seeking explanations for the even more puzzling aspects of their Pu'er tea business, discussed their village's success in these terms: “There is something that would

be unexplainable if you don't take the Buddha's mercy into account. It is only around 4 kilometers from our village to the neighboring village. Some of our tea gardens are adjacent to the other village's tea gardens on the same mountain slope. The price of the tea processed in our village could fetch as high as ¥1,000/kg, while the price of the tea processed in the other village could never reach over ¥300/kg." Although the neighboring village is a Bulang village as well, residents of Man village interpret the higher price of their tea and their monetary success as rewards for their pious Buddhist actions. And the only way to get more merit is by doing more good deeds.

While the future of the tea business is beyond their control, villagers of Man continue constructing their village temple: "We built this magnificent temple together for the entire village. The temple will always be there and protect our village." A temple's physical presence stands as a potent manifestation of Man villagers' collective faith and anxiety. Merit-making through donations endows them with a sense of agency and transports them from an uncontrollable market to a field of merit, where a sense of control of the future is generated through practice.

Critical to understanding the logic of the Bulang people's generous donations is the essence of this action, that is, Buddhist gift-giving. In the Thai-Lao and Burmese Theravada Buddhist context, in line with the Buddhist tradition in the Bulang society of Xishuangbanna, Buddhist gift-giving exists on a spectrum from non-reciprocal to directly reciprocal (Sihlé 2015: 365). While Buddhist donations sometimes involve reciprocity between laypeople and monastics, such as in the exchange of religious services for remuneration (*ibid.*: 367), the cases in this article featured explicitly non-reciprocal Buddhist donations. Building their village temple serves as a field of merit where Bulang people can give without expectation of material returns from the receivers of their gifts, namely, monks and temples. Donations given by laypersons in Theravada Buddhist merit-making do produce a return in a suspended flow of time (Laidlaw 2000: 625). This return, believed to be in the form of merit, is not provided by the monastic recipients of the laities' gifts, but instead by the action of gift-giving itself (Sihlé 2015: 363).

In today's Bulang community, merit gained through donations is useful not only in the afterlife, as it is in many Theravada Buddhist traditions (e.g., Parry 1986: 468); it is also a force of blessing in this life. While the return of merit is perhaps still an "exchange out of time" (Laidlaw 2000: 625), in the present religious economy of the Bulang, the reward for good deeds is not necessarily suspended into the beyond; instead, people expect a return in the here and now. Encountered within the uncertain market, which is the source of cash for all Bulang donations, merit changes from a soteriological to a blessing role because protection is expected at once. This is similar to the cash-merit nexus described by Fisher (2008): donating more money does not necessarily bring

more soteriological merit, but at the very least it means more protection/blessing in the here and now. The uncertainty of the market may not change, but the syncretism of merit and blessing provides Bulang people with a sense of certainty.

## Changing Religious Practices and the Tea Economy

The sense of certainty is not only crucial with regard to Bulang people's market activities. It is also important in maintaining the 'cash-merit-cash' relationship—a complicated correlation between merit-making and economic behavior that is deeply rooted in the connection between merit and wealth. Wealth is not only a means of making more merit, but is also the return on the merit one has already acquired (Keyes 1973: 99; Pfanner and Ingersoll 1962: 356). Wealth gained legitimately is a demonstration of higher moral standing in Bulang communities. After the price of ancient Pu'er tea skyrocketed toward the end of the 2000s, and families with many ancient tea trees became more and more affluent, new perceptions and expectations of personal wealth and income have developed. This has changed the concept of merit-making in two ways. First, in addition to gaining more merit, donating cash to temples and sponsoring lavish rituals are the most important and efficient ways to show one's prestige. Second, merit-making by those who have become much wealthier through the tea business is aimed at showing gratitude to Buddha.

In May 2014, Kanm, the first person in Man village to engage in commercial activities with tea merchants, sponsored a lavish *dan* Mahaban ritual. He invited 10 abbots from other villages to chant along with the local abbot and novices during the ceremony. Kanm informed me with pride that he was the only person in Man villagers' living memory who could sponsor such a big ritual on his own. It lasted seven days and cost him around ¥40,000. Mahaban is the biggest *dan* ritual for a family or layperson in Xishuangbanna. Its sponsor and family members are thought to be blessed in this life and to gain a good rebirth in the next life.

However, even on the occasion of such a ritual of merit-making, Kanm expressed his mixed feelings about his tea business: "Without being blessed by the Buddha, I could not be the lucky one who could undertake the tea business smoothly over many years." Kanm perceived Buddhist blessing as indispensable to his success, and the action of sponsoring the *dan* ritual was intended to express his gratitude to the Buddha's benevolence: "I want to thank Pazhao [Buddha in Bulang and Dai language]. If I don't host this ritual now that I can afford it, I will not feel at peace in my heart. Who knows what will happen to me, to my business, and to my family?" Like many Bulang intermediaries who gained money through the tea business, Kanm considered his well-being and future success in the tea business possible only as a reward for being a pious Buddhist.

Merit-making through donations in Bulang villages is entangled with economic activities in a more dynamic and complex way. Villagers spend the money they make through the tea business on temple constructions and rituals to be able to continue making more money through the tea business; however, in doing tea business, they face uncertainties and sometimes need to take risks. I therefore suggest, concurring with David Pfanner and Jasper Ingersoll (1962), that the concept of merit not only provides a moral basis for entrepreneurship in markets, but also promotes risk-taking economic behavior. This runs counter to Spiro's (1982: 461) understanding of merit-making patterns as "a serious obstacle to a better standard of living" in people's present lives, and Tan Leshan's (2005: 119–123) argument that merit-making has no significant consequences on the overall economy of Dai Lue villages in Xishuangbanna.

Since dealing with the frustrating uncertainty of the tea business is entangled with the ideology of merit and merit-making, Bulang people seek reassurance through religion when risk-taking becomes increasingly unmanageable. Families who own ancient tea trees have raised their objections to tea adulteration. They believe that only by protecting the reputation of the tea in their village will they be better off in the long run. However, families who possess small ancient tea gardens or who do not possess any ancient tea trees disagree. "They can say that [to protect the reputation of the tea is important] because they have lots of ancient tea trees. It is hypocritical because in that way they can keep the high price of their ancient tea and get richer. What do people like me get?" complained Jian, a Bulang man who does not own an ancient tea garden. As income inequality has become more and more visible among households whose incomes were more or less equal before the marketization of Pu'er tea, risk-taking has endangered not only the villagers' tea business but also their communal relations.

In early March 2015, about a week before the spring tea hit the market, the village of Man organized a 'pouring-water-onto-the-earth' (*di shui in Mandarin, ya wen in Bulang*) ceremony. The ritual was co-initiated by the committees of the village and the village temple. At least one male adult from each household was mandated to attend the ritual. It should be noted that there are two kinds of such rituals in Bulang villages. The first is for transferring merit one has gained to one's family members, both living and deceased, as well as to other socially important people, such as teachers and monks. This action of pouring-water-onto-the-earth is widely practiced among other ethnic groups, such as the Dai and the Lahu (Walker 2011: 359), and is normally performed at the end of any merit-making ritual. The second kind involves making a vow, which is usually a curse. These rituals were commonly performed to regulate disputes between people. "It is very serious," explained the Bo Zhang<sup>10</sup> of Man village. "Many people would commit their bad deeds before making this vow, because if you make this vow, bad things will definitely happen to you. When

we pour water onto the earth, it is a powerful evidence of what you said and what you did.”

The cursing ritual of pouring water had not been performed in over two decades, my interlocutors informed me. Monks do not want to perform this ritual because it is also inauspicious for them. Even if it involves people who did bad things and lied in front of Buddha, it is still not good for the monks if terrible things happen to these people or their family members. However, this ritual was reinvented and performed in the village of Man. The main procedure of the ritual took place as follows. All the ritual attendees first worshiped the three treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Then the abbot chanted Buddhist sutra for approximately half an hour. During the chanting, donations were collected among all the attendees by passing a small basin. Before the end of the chanting, the abbot held a bowl of water in his left hand and a bunch of branches in his right hand, and shook water onto all the participants. After sitting back down in front of the lay people, he chanted: “Today you come to pour water on the earth. All of you must ensure that you will not mix any terrace of other villages or our own village into the ancient tea of our village. If you do, you will get sick and your whole family will not have peace. A vow in front of Buddha should be remembered. You cannot break this vow because today you have made it in front of Buddha.” At the same time, all the participants poured water onto the earth (they now pour water into a small basin because the temple hall’s floor has been tiled).

Amid the lucrative but highly unregulated development of the Pu’er tea market, the economic behavior of Bulang people is more closely correlated with religious practices. Religious beliefs not only allow villagers to gain a sense of control, but also manage the moral standing of the whole community. The ritual of pouring water was initiated when several young tea businessmen bought much cheaper tea from nearby villages and sold it as the ancient tea of Man village. While mixing a small portion of terrace tea into ancient tea of their own village is considered manageable risk-taking, the effect of mixing other villages’ tea is incalculable and thus needs moral regulation. The reinvention and performance of the ritual shows that while religious values regulate market actions and reinforce communal relations, religious activities have also been reshaped by the market.

## **Conclusion**

The expansion of the Pu’er tea market has transformed many upland villages from geographically isolated and impoverished places into areas of rapid growth, dramatically changing their livelihood and economic conditions in less than two decades. However, a dearth of reliable knowledge about the lucrative



yet erratic tea market, on which villagers rely completely, has made dealing with uncertainty and taking risks part of the daily life of both individuals and communities. In the case of the Bulang, the uncertainty of the market is interpreted through the Buddhist ideology of karma and merit—making merit and seeking blessing are metaphysically effective ways for Bulang people to deal with the anxiety caused by the market. Risk-taking as part of market behavior is carefully calculated. However, when risk-taking is out of the control of the villagers, religious rituals such as pouring water regulate market behaviors.

Shen Haimei (2013) demonstrates that the worship of guardian spirits provides genuine ways of mitigating high risks at a practical level in a Dai community in Xishuangbanna, and it is now part of the community's particular encounter with modernity. From the cases of the Bulang and the Dai, we can see clearly that the dramatic economic transformation in Xishuangbanna deeply intertwines with local people's religious practices. Although modernity provides the larger social context for the Bulang people's engagement in the Pu'er tea business, it is their religious beliefs and practices that provide them with clear interpretations of, and intrinsic motivations for, their economic actions.

In Bulang communities, charismatic power is closely interwoven with commercial activities. Under the concept of 'one could gain more by donating more', capital is in this sense a measure of spirituality. The links between merit-making and commercial activities in Bulang society do not directly turn Theravada Buddhism into a 'prosperity religion' (Jackson 1999). However, it is primarily Theravada Buddhism and its ideology that culturally situate the market and money in this society, especially if we understand that "the experience of merit and merit-making [is] a material exchange process, at the heart of which [is] the practice of seeking, attaining, and accumulating this-worldly benefits" (Walsh 2007: 361). Conversely, the market economy has also changed the way Bulang people think about merit and making merit. The act of giving, which is always related to money, has overshadowed acts of holding precepts and meditation and has become the most important and prevalent way of making merit.

The entanglement of a precarious economy and religious practices in the Bulang community reflects how marginalized ethnic groups interpret and experience rapid marketization at both psychological and social levels, as well as the consequences of this marketization. As we have seen, Bulang individuals and families creatively deal with the uncertainties and risks of the tea economy. For example, they learn to sense the taste of Pu'er tea and try all possible ways to build long-term business relationships with tea businesspeople and middlemen outside of their village (Ma 2021). In combination with these practical skills required in the tea market, long-standing practices of merit-making and local ritual have helped the Bulang to rise to the perennial challenges of risks and uncertainty. This provides an important analytical perspective on the complex relationship between religious practice and the pursuit of wealth. The

experiences of an uncertain and risky economy are not unique to this Bulang community; they are shared in villages across China and Southeast Asia as local economies face enormous uncertainties and risks. Religion remains central to the ways in which these people understand and experience the challenges of the market economy.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Patrice Ladwig, Peter van der Veer, Susan K. McCarthy, Fenggang Yang, and Vala Carsten for their insightful comments and useful discussions, which helped shape an early version of this article. Special thanks go to Hans Steinmüller and Raviv Litman, whose constructive feedback aided in later revisions. I would also like to thank Stevan Harrell, who waived his anonymity, and another reviewer, both of whom provided engaging comments that helped to improve this article. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my Bulang interlocutors in Xishuangbanna for their hospitality and for graciously spending time with me.

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## Notes

1. As did the rest of China, Bulang communities in Xishuangbanna experienced the collectivization and Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, and the Reform and Opening in the early 1980s. According to my interviewees, their economic condition did not change significantly all through these political changes, since they remained in dire poverty.
2. It is worth noting that in Buddhist doctrine the purity of intentions is more important than the donation amount and determines the merit derived. However, in the minds of lay Bulang, the accumulation of merit depends more on

how much and on which occasions one donates. Donations made on ritual occasions gain more merit than casual or everyday donations. Only very senior monks who are familiar with Buddhist doctrine emphasize intentions, meditations, and holding precepts. However, in practice they also donate as much money as they can to gain more merit. In addition, Bulang people generally believe that anyone who is willing to donate has good intentions. Therefore, the amount of merit one gains depends mostly on the amount given.

3. Statistics from the Sixth Population Census conducted in 2010. See <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm>.
4. The names of individuals and the village where most of the ethnography was collected are pseudonyms. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of dialogue and texts are my own.
5. Although the cause of this bubble is not entirely clear, many tea traders blame speculation. When the price of Pu'er tea reached an absurdly high level, buyers unloaded their stocks and disappeared. More than half of Pu'er tea traders who purchased the tea in the spring of 2007, at a very high price, went bankrupt when they were forced to sell it at a much lower price.
6. The price of Pu'er tea is very much village based. However, the price of Pu'er tea in one village varies greatly from season to season. Usually, the price of tea harvested in spring is the highest, followed by the tea harvested in autumn. Locally known as *gu hua cha*, which means 'rice-bloom-tea', the latter is harvested when rice is blooming in Xishuangbanna. Tea harvested during the rainy season from June to September (known as *yu shui cha*, or rainwater tea) is considered the worst and is thus the cheapest.
7. The Bulang word for merit comes from the Dai language and is pronounced *wen* or *bon*, which is a loanword from the Pāli *puñña* (merit). Bulang and Dai people also refer to merit as *nawen/nabon*—*na* means 'field' and *nawen/nabon* means 'field of merit'.
8. This is the lowest estimate of the total donations of every household. Many people had lost track of the amount of money they had given for construction costs. Most of them only remember the apportioned amounts and larger sums of money they gave or spent.
9. The official grade of tea quality in Bulang Mountain consisted of seven levels during the unified purchasing period from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. Almost all the Pu'er tea that is now extremely expensive was considered to be low quality before the early 2000s, as it did not fit into the national standard of high-quality tea—that is, green, fresh, and with small leaves.
10. Bozhang is a Bulang and Dai Lue term in Xishuangbanna for a religious leader among the laypeople. A Bozhang must be selected from among the disrobed monks and be familiar with all the complexities of local ritual procedures. In each Bulang and Dai Lue village, a Bozhang plays multiple roles, including but not limited to a temple manager, mediator between monks and laypeople, and ritual specialist.

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