

That *chai* began its progress to becoming India's national beverage only in the late nineteenth century may be taken to underscore the transformative potential of empire and commodity – tea, in this case.¹ This history has been told many times over to become emblematic in popular culture of the seemingly 'benign' and supposedly 'civilising' impact of British imperialism, although the truth of labour exploitation and violence tells a different story. This story is seen, furthermore, as paradigmatic of nineteenth-century globalisation, in which tea stands alongside such goods as sugar, rubber, coffee, and cocoa produced on plantations around the world to service increasingly global markets and pools of consumers.²

This story can all be rehearsed in a few lines, however, and doing so helps establish the point of departure for the very different narratives presented in what follows.³ British merchants started to purchase Chinese tea in the seventeenth century, although the fashion for tea consumption really took off in the eighteenth century, while the East India Company's acquisition of Bengal in 1757 meant that an illegal trade in Indian opium to China financed a legal trade in Chinese tea to the West. By the 1800s, the Company was tiring with China's monopoly. But an additional problem was the Qing government's clamping down in the 1830s on opium imported illegally from British India into China, for the purchase of tea was financed through the sale of the drug. With the future of the tea trade thrown into flux, the Company's governor general established the Tea Committee in 1834, its task the experiment in tea cultivation in Assam.⁴ And so began Indian cultivation (to be followed by plantations in such places as Ceylon, where Thomas Lipton established his plantation, and Kenya), with Indian exports of tea to Britain surpassing those from China by 1888. Only a very few Indians drank

¹ On the process by which tea became India's 'national beverage', paying attention to marketing strategies: Philip Lutgendorf, 'Making Tea in India: Chai, Capitalism, Culture', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 113, no. 1 (2012), 11-31.

² See, for example: Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created. Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

³ For an indicative popular history, see: Sarah Rose, *For All the Tea in China. How England Stole the World's Favourite Drink and Changed History* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

⁴ The history of this enterprise has most recently been analysed by: Sharma, *Empire's Garden*.

tea until the dawn of the twentieth century, however, when British expatriate firms started to more seriously consider the ‘market at our door’.⁵ By stages, therefore, the creation of new production centres and new markets for tea, not to mention the exaltation of tea as a coveted global commodity, progressed in tandem with the expansion of Britain’s empire and the development of British economic interests.

As this unfolded and as Indian tea began to account for the greater bulk of British imports, so Russia became the most important market for Chinese tea.⁶ This chapter examines such sites of production and networks of trade within the Eurasian continental interior, which were largely beyond the British imperial world forged by trans-oceanic trade. It calls attention to preferences for particular types or preparations of tea, forms of material culture, and modes of consumption in Russia, Central Asia, parts of China, and Burma rather different from those more familiar to British merchants and their customers. In so doing, it brings to light different connections of commodity and empire to those prevalent in much of the scholarly literature, presenting, instead, something of this commodity’s other histories.

In pursuit of these endeavours and arguments, the present chapter largely makes use of British sources from archives in London, New Delhi, and Yangon (Rangoon). This affords an opportunity to highlight how British imperial interests stimulated knowledge production of these other networks and markets, and how empire and commodity thereby became entangled *epistemologically* – within the archive left behind by these endeavours, not least. The first section explores what was *not* known to the British and of which they learnt only in time – namely, Russia’s tea trade with China – bringing to light the organisation of trade and different routes, the importance of trade to Russia’s economy, and the role of tea in Britain’s rivalry with Russia for hegemony in later nineteenth-century Asia.

⁵ Lutgendorf, ‘Making Tea’, 13 and *passim*.

⁶ Lee, ‘From Kiachta’, 196.

The second and third sections rove across Burma, conquered in stages by Britain, whose inquiries regarding the new colony revealed the commodification of a familiar substance (tea) markedly different from that overseen by the British in other parts of their empire. Though steadily improving, it was nevertheless the defectiveness or deficiency of knowledge that fuelled fantasies of the spread of the plantation complex to the Eurasian interior, thereby bringing the commodity chain into line with the empire at large. This was desirable so long as it was under the aegis of Europeans; unease about allowing indigenous collaborators to establish plantations or ‘tea gardens’ arose because the plantation was a central institution of the ‘agricultural racial capitalism’ in the Tropics upon which European rule was premised.

The final section focusses on a relatively neglected part of Britain’s empire in South Asia where plantations *were* established – namely, the hilly parts of Punjab – and returns to the matter of geopolitical rivalry. The (poor) quality and (parlous) stock of knowledge also had the effect of palpitating fear of invasion from across the landward border and concerns for imperial security and prestige, yet also suggested the prospect for penetrating new ‘trans-frontier’ markets with products such as tea to stymy or offset the (commercial) advances of imperial rivals. In consequence, India’s tea gardens did not merely service a primary market in the metropolitan core and a secondary one in the colonies. Indian tea was also implicated in checking the advance of rivals, in the making of borderlands, and in the defence of empire.

By moving away from the commonplace history of tea told from the British point of view – in which Asia is the producer and the West the consumer of tea – this chapter sheds new light on an alternative set of geographies of production and exchange, and of modes of consumption. By fixing attention on tea within a particular set of archives, therefore, this chapter also reveals some of the British Empire’s other histories – ones that not only connect empire and commodity via movements of global capital and (local or international) labour, but also connect tangible or material substance with the more vaporous matters of Great Power

rivalry, imperial prestige, and feelings of insecurity in the British colonial world. The conclusion mulls over the methodological implications of such an approach for commodity histories of empire, focussing particularly on the concern with colonial knowledge-creation that runs through this chapter.

Trade Networks

Canton has become famous as the primary site of China's interchange with British and other European merchants in the period before the Opium War (1839-42). Canton, however, was not the only place where Chinese merchants could (legally) do business with foreigners, merely the only maritime port. Kiakhta, situated roughly halfway between Lake Baikal in Siberia and the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar, emerged after 1727 as the primary entrepot of Russian trade with China. Tea was not only a mainstay of the 'Canton trade' with the north Atlantic economies; it was also as important, perhaps more so, to this terrestrial trans-Eurasian network of exchange.

Over the eighteenth century, Russia's thirst for tea developed to the extent that it became the main import from China (alongside gold, silver, rhubarb, silks, porcelain, and precious stones) in return for pelts and cloth, and was critical to China's 'domestication' within Russia.⁷ Russians drank both flower tea and black tea formed into bricks in the eighteenth century, with a taste for yellow, green, and black loose-leaf teas also firmly established by the close of the nineteenth century.⁸ From the tea-production regions, Chinese traders transported tea some 3,400 miles to Maimachen (Altanbulag) on the Russian-Mongolian frontier, where merchants belonging to Russian guilds purchased the tea and took it to Kiakhta.⁹ From Kiakhta,

⁷ Mark Gamsa, 'Refractions of China in Russia, and of Russia in China: Ideas and Things', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 60, no. 5 (2017), 549-84.

⁸ Anne Lincoln Fitzpatrick, *The Great Russian Fair. Nizhnii Novgorod, 1840-90* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 48; NAI-F, *Frontier A*, November 1884, Nos. 27-34, 2.

⁹ Chinyun Lee, 'From Kiachta to Vladivostok: Russian Merchants and the Tea Trade', *Region*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2014), 195-218, here 197, 201-05.

most of this tea was delivered 3,800 miles away by land, lake, and river routes to the great fair at Nizhnii Novgorod (and latterly to minor markets, such as Kazan or Irbit), the value of which by the 1840s-60s has been estimated to range from four to ten million roubles, with the 60,000 chests of tea delivered each August in the 1860s accounting for around 40 per cent of national imports.¹⁰ Once arrived in Nizhnii Novgorod, merchants – mostly from Moscow – made the initial viewing, smelling, and tasting of tea in the ‘Chinese Rows’ of the fair, before bargaining commenced with the wholesalers, all of which was part and parcel of the transformation of substance into commodity in the distinctive domain of the Russian Empire.¹¹ Tea was not only significant to the national economy, however; it was of such singular importance as to have practically become a medium of exchange, the profits from which indexed the liquidity of the Russia-China trade.¹²

After the Opium War, the overland trade via Kiakhta was gradually supplanted.¹³ Among the mitigating factors were Russians’ suspicion toward Canton tea, its taste deemed inferior, whereas the desert journey was held to render the flavour of ‘caravan tea’ superior; and new riverine-coastal transport networks that boosted, rather than unequivocally undermining, terrestrial networks for a time.¹⁴ Yet, the Treaty of Tientsin (1858) paved the way to Russian access to seven commercial ports while the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) – and the associated growth of traffic at the Black Sea port of Odessa – reduced the distance, cost, and time taken for shipments to reach the Russian Empire from China. To this may be added the permission granted to Russians to move about within China from 1862, with a number of Russian entrepreneurs establishing tea factories from 1863 onward, foremost at Hankow, that

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Nizhnii Novgorod*, 48, 50. These figures correspond fairly well with those found in a British intelligence source (of the sort discussed, below): National Archives of India, New Delhi, Foreign Department Proceedings (henceforth: NAI-F), S.I., June 1869, No. 52, 3-4.

¹¹ Fitzpatrick, *Nizhnii Novgorod*, 52.

¹² *Ibid*, 48-53.

¹³ For the impact of the Taiping Rebellion on the geography of tea production and trade with Russia: Lee, ‘From Kiachta’, 198.

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Nizhnii Novgorod*, 49, 53-54. Lee, ‘From Kiachta’, 197, 203-06.

of Molchanoff, Pechatnoff, and Company (est. 1874) being the largest.¹⁵ By 1866, these effects were so great as to be felt at Nizhnii Novgorod, where three-quarters of all tea sales in 1866 were of ‘Canton tea’ (maritime, via London) rather than ‘Kiakhta tea’ (terrestrial).¹⁶

Imperial rivalry lay at the very core of Russia’s maritime enterprise in an unexpected way, as noted by Chinyun Lee. It was the entrepreneur, Molchanoff, who assisted in the construction of Russia’s ‘Society of the Volunteer Fleet’ to promote Russian trade as ‘a merchant fleet to convey settlers and assist the naval forces.’¹⁷ Inspiration came from the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), when Russia nearly came to the brink of conflict with Britain, and when Russian merchants and patriots raised some six million roubles to support cargo and the navy. From 1880, the Fleet chartered German vessels to ply the Hankow-Fuzhou-Ceylon-Odessa route, which thereby became the backbone of rivalry with the ‘Canton tea’ trade.¹⁸

For its part, Britain took an interest in trans-Eurasian trade networks from the late 1860s, around the time the Kiakhta merchants’ fortunes started to fade but before the dramatic expansion of these Russian maritime networks. This interest came not from the metropole but from a colonial government (India). Tellingly of what is to come in the rest of this chapter, the impetus was India’s security in the context of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Asia. Around the time tea seeds were smuggled out of China and plans for the establishment of ‘tea gardens’ in Assam in northeast India began to take shape, Company men were beginning to explore the swathe of territory northwest of Delhi all the way to the oasis states of Central Asia. They spotted what was salient in a context of the commercial and geopolitical rivalry mounting gradually between the two powers from the 1830s. They duly noted and described all those Russian and English goods they found in various marts, therefore, including a range of Russian and Chinese goods

¹⁵ Ibid, 199-201 for details of their operations.

¹⁶ Fitzpatrick, *Nizhnii Novgorod*, 54-55.

¹⁷ Lee, ‘From Kiakhta’, 207.

¹⁸ Ibid, 207-09.

available in the Kabul bazaar – tea being among them.¹⁹ This sign of Russian presence at India's borders seemed increasingly less innocuous in the coming decades.

By the late 1860s, not only had British India's north-western frontier extended to the border with Afghanistan; Russia's conquest of the khanates of Khiva and Khokand – and the transformation of Bukhara into a suzerainty – meant that Russia and Britain were near neighbours in Asia. This was the backdrop to closer British interest in trans-Eurasian terrestrial networks, including in tea.²⁰ British political agents and ambassadors in Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan were enjoined to supply information to the government of British India, which relayed the pertinent details to London.²¹ One side of this interest was in Russia's tea culture and its involvement in trade within the Eurasian interior, with information supplied in a tract first published in 1867 – as Russia's advance into Central Asia was unfolding – by John Lumley-Savile, then secretary to the British ambassador to the Tsar's court in St Petersburg. Tea was to all classes in Russia, Lumley asserted, as 'tobacco to an inveterate smoker.'²² The distance from China's tea-producing regions to Moscow via Kiakhta was estimated at 7,291 miles, a journey of six months (or less if the ice could be contended with more easily), but the journey to Central Asian markets via Kiakhta or other terrestrial routes were far shorter.²³ Lumley declared that it was not the current meagre state of trade via Eastern or Chinese Turkestan to Central Asia and Orenburg – a Russian frontier post on the Kazakh Steppe – but its future prospects that warranted the 'interest of tea cultivators in the Himalayas, to whom an extensive market now appears to be open'.²⁴ Lumley noted the preference for green and brick

¹⁹ National Archives of India, New Delhi, Foreign Department Proceedings (henceforth: NAI-F), Political, 9 May 1836, No. 42, paragraph 13; NAI-F, Political, 11 April 1838, No. 30, 11; NAI-F, Political, 17 July 1839, No. 22-24, 9.

²⁰ Jagjeet Lally, *India and the Silk Roads. The History of a Trading World* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2021), 161-215 for the process of colonial conquest and the tapping of intelligence and knowledge networks.

²¹ NAI-F, S.I., June 1869, Nos. 49-57.

²² John Lumley, *Report of Mr. Lumley on the Tea Trade of Russia* (Calcutta: Foreign Department Press, 1869), 1.

²³ *Ibid*, 41.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 66 for citation, and 67-112 for details about the main routes, the major entrepôts, the character and value of trade at these places, and so forth.

teas and the prices prevailing for these articles in Bukhara and Tashkent while advocating for the establishment of a British Indian tea trade with Central Asia.²⁵

Russia's involvement in supplying Central Asian markets reflected one aspect of British Indian inquiries; another concerned the headway made by merchants from the British Indian side of the border with Afghanistan – or other states under Britain's sphere of influence, such as Nepal or Qajar Iran – into the same markets. Only in the aftermath of the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80), however, could the Government of India finally enumerate the various routes by which it believed tea reached Central Asian bazaars.²⁶ First, there was Chinese tea transported by caravan, as already described. Second, there were Chinese teas that made their way by maritime channels into Punjab, and then by caravan across the Indo-Afghan frontier and via Kabul, alongside a small proportion of Indian teas (although these were probably purchased for final consumption in Afghanistan, not Central Asia). The preponderance of Chinese over Indian teas is corroborated by the decanal returns submitted to government in 1887.²⁷ Third, there were Chinese teas – and some Java and Ceylon tea – re-exported from the port of Bombay to ports on the Persian Gulf, and from thence overland on camels to Central Asia.²⁸ Green tea – not black – continued to dominate in such entrepôts as Bukhara, Tashkent, and Kabul.²⁹ In 1888, there followed an inquiry into the costs associated with the latter two routes – for these were, to an extent, under the aegis of British imperialism in Asia – revealing

²⁵ Ibid, 113, 118-51 for an exposition of the prospects of such an enterprise, taking in routes, costs of transport, tariffs, and the types of tea preferred and the prices at which substitutes would find sale.

²⁶ NAI-F, Frontier A, December 1885, Nos. 3-8, frontmatter, 3. Updated and more detailed information followed at the end of the century, occasioned by growth of the Black Sea port of Batoum: NAI-F, Frontier, May 1896, 1-16. For the petition lodged by Central Asian merchants with the Russian authorities regarding trade in tea from China and India via Bombay and Batoum, see: NAI-F, Secret F, April 1890, Nos. 150-192.

²⁷ NAI-F, August 1887, No. 37.

²⁸ See, also: NAI-F, Secret F, January 1891, Nos. 141-142, 81.

²⁹ NAI-F, SH, 1869, Nos. 69-70. This was also the case in Persia: NAI-F, Frontier A, December 1888, No.103, 3-4.

that the routes via Afghanistan were shorter and cheaper but for the ‘exorbitant’ exactions made by the Afghan king (a subject to which this chapter returns).³⁰

By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, trade from China to Russia and Central Asia was very well-established, therefore, the latter probably of much longer pedigree. Around the same time, the dual impact of new transport technologies and the springing up of new sites of production was to shift and make more intricate the networks of the global tea trade. Although the terrestrial, trans-Eurasian networks were at something of a remove from the trans-oceanic ones, they were not unaffected by these shifts (and other more ‘domestic’ changes). Sino-Russian-Central Asian tea trade became more complex as new routes developed, which were additionally infused with an increasingly wider variety of teas. Such experience was not limited to the Eurasian interior; the networks of trans-Saharan trade were also suffused with new goods – including green tea and sugar, which ‘filtered into western African markets with tremendous cultural as well as physiological repercussions’ – in the era after the abolition of the slave trade, when new exchanges necessarily developed in place of human trafficking and in tandem with the steady globalisation of the world economy.³¹ The global is certainly an appropriate framework for this inquiry, yet what also emerges from the attention paid, above, to imperial rivalry is the relevance of the trans-imperial terrain of analysis. The chapter returns to these matters but first makes a detour to another interior space to consider the very identity of tea and tea culture.

Material Culture

I believe, indeed, that none of the tea sold in Amaraopora is the produce of China. And it is a remarkable fact, that large quantities of tea are imported *into* the province of Yunan from the Shan states between the Irawadi and the Cambodia River. The

³⁰ NAI-F, Frontier A, December 1888, No.102-103. See, also: NAI-F, Secret F, May 1888, No.40, the (very detailed) contents of which are of the same tenor and which are drawn from numerous sources, from newspaper articles to official trade returns from various provinces, as well as despatches from frontier agents.

³¹ Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails. Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 108-09, 136-37.

Burmese Governor and his followers [...] treated as preposterous the [...] assertion that tea grew in China. They looked on China as purely a tea-importing country.³²

Based on their knowledge, members of this British delegation to the Burmese court in 1855 took it for granted that tea was ‘Chinese’ – a plant originating and cultivated in China, transformed in China into a substance for consumption, and exported from China to other parts of the world. But their knowledge emerged from a particular set of encounters, predicated on a particular set of networks, productive of very particular travails – namely, those sketched at the very beginning of this chapter. This was all about to change, however. The so-called New Imperialism of the second half of the nineteenth century involved the spread of European imperialisms from the maritime rimlands to the continental interior of Afro-Eurasia; the final defeat of the Burmese court in 1885 and the conquest of ‘Upper Burma’ was part of this process.³³ In turn, European knowledges widened, now witness to societies, economies, and trade from new vantage points.

By the 1890s, as British knowledge of the interior parts of Burma and of Burma-China trade developed through official inquiry, so tea also came to be seen by some eyes as to some extent ‘Burmese’. Tea plants – sometimes expressly cultivated for the leaves – were found in the uplands inhabited by the Kachin and Wa peoples in and around the Burma-China borderland.³⁴ The earliest reports deemed this inferior to what was by then grown in Assam, much as Assam teas had once been deemed inferior to those of China, but such prejudices were gradually diluted away.³⁵ Tea was an important article of production in the Shan highlands, with merchants carrying Shan tea to markets in the Irrawaddy valley and neighbouring regions.

³² Henry Yule, *Narrative of the Mission Sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855, with Notices of the Country, Government, and People* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1858), 150.

³³ Lally, *Silk Roads*, 217-56.

³⁴ John Anderson, *Mandalay to Momiën: A Narrative of the Two Expeditions to Western China of 1868 and 1875 under Colonel Edward B. Sladen and Colonel Horace Browne* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1876), 129-30; C. E. K. Macquoid, *Report of the Intelligence Officer on Tour with the Superintendent, Northern Shan States, 1895-96* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1896), 26-27.

³⁵ NAI-F, PC, 18 July 1836, Nos. 84-85, ff. 4-16.

A group of Shan traders lodged a complaint following the conquest of 1885, for instance, for not only had they been forced to flee without their goods amid the disarray, but were fraudulently represented in the case of Queen Empress vs. E. M. Pascal and Moung Ye, with the eponymous Mr Pascal making off with the sum of over twenty thousand rupees paid in reparation.³⁶ Trade statistics compiled in the years following the conquest indeed suggested tea was important to local economies in the Shan territories in Upper Burma even as it was sufficiently mysterious to the colonial administration based in Lower Burma.³⁷ In 1890, more detailed information was collated in a note penned by the local European officer based on evidence collected through the inquiries of Maung Ne Dun and Shan Pweôk with Shan tea dealers.³⁸

On the one hand, it should come as no surprise that tea was cultivated in the Kachin, Wa, and especially Shan territories, given their proximity to China's tea hills and to Assam, respectively home to the *Camellia sinensis* (so-called 'true' tea) and *Camellia assamica* (so-called 'wild' tea) plants, not to mention the similarity of the *terroir*.³⁹ On the other hand, it was curious that tea was not merely cultivated in the Shan country but also taken by merchants plying the caravan routes straddling the Irrawaddy valley and southern China. Across the (undemarcated) border lay important centres of tea production in southern Yunnan – especially those of Sipsongpanna (Xishuangbanna) prefecture, including Puer – not that these were much frequented by Chinese until the Qing conquest of Yunnan and its (violent) incorporation into

³⁶ National Archives of Myanmar (henceforth: NAM), Chief Secretary's Office (British Burma), Foreign Department, 1891, 2C, 8803, especially 10-15, 18, 32-38, where it is alleged that the present case is also partly built upon a fraud by the Shan traders themselves, and 41.

³⁷ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 147, 183-84, 225.

³⁸ The note merited printing in full within the appendix to the following: Anon., *Report on the Trade between Burma and the Adjoining Foreign Countries for the Three years ending the 31st March 1890* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1890).

³⁹ Tea found in the jungle of the Kachin Hills was alleged to be a wild type like that of Assam: Anon., *Sketch of the Singphos, or the Kakhyens of Burmah: the Position of this Tribe as Regards Baumo, and the Inland Trade of the Valley of the Irrawaddy with Yuman and their Connection with the North-eastern Frontier of Assam* (Calcutta: W. Ridsdale, Military Orphan Press, 1847), 28. For a detailed description of both Yunnan tea plantations and manufacture and Shan tea cultivation: NAI-F, K.W./External, December 1892, Nos. 113-118, Part B.

Imperial China as a largely extractive periphery-cum-colony in the eighteenth century.⁴⁰ Around 500 kilometres due east of Mandalay, Simao was an important trade town in southern Yunnan province, its markets receiving Burmese cotton, for instance, a staple of long standing. Among the goods despatched from Simao was the fine tea of the surrounding Puer district, seven-tenths of which allegedly sold within eastern Yunnan and Sichuan.⁴¹ The remainder found its way not to Burma but to western Yunnan and to Tibet. One early twentieth-century observer saw a ‘Tibetan caravan of 300 or 400 mules, all laden with tea’ – the trade brisk in festal years ‘when it would be necessary to make presents of tea to the Lamas’, with tea also ‘so indispensable to the Tibetans that the disc shaped ‘bricks’ will pass current everywhere, and are often preferred to silver.’⁴² Others noted that tea was used as currency in upland Burma, too, for tea was ‘paid in lieu of revenue to the Burmese Government’ but also as payment of fees ‘to Priests on all occasions such as deaths marriages divorcement &c.’ or to ‘state officials on the settling of disputes’.⁴³

What of Burmese tea? Burmese teas were mainly consumed in the Burma-China borderland and in Burma itself, where they arrived in a variety of preparations rather than being of a single type.⁴⁴ In their encounter with Burmese teas, British observers were struck by the transformation of a familiar substance into a wholly unfamiliar commodity in terms of the manner of preparation, overall appearance, sale, consumption, and material culture – its entire commodification, in other words, differing from what prevailed in British-controlled exchange networks. A number of sources focus not on the sale of tea in loose leaf form, as might have been more familiar to European drinkers, and certainly available, but that more commonly sold

⁴⁰ C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands. The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 52-58, and 178-80, for details of Sipsongpanna's tea economy and the Qing-era government and commercial interest in it, and *passim*, for the conquest and colonisation of Yunnan.

⁴¹ H. R. Davies, *Yün-nan. The Link between India and the Yangtze* (Cambridge: University Press, 1909), 96-97.

⁴² *Ibid*, citations 99 and 279, respectively.

⁴³ NAI-F, PC, 18 July 1836, Nos. 84-85, ff. 12-13.

⁴⁴ *Report on the Trade [...] 1890*, xxvi.

in discs, balls, or bricks.⁴⁵ In Puer, for example, tea was ‘made up into disc-shaped cakes some eight inches in diameter and one inch thick, weighing about 12 ozs. [...] [called] *yüan*’ and ‘then put together in packets of seven, placed one on top of the other, and done up with strips of the outer bark of bamboo’ into a packet called a ‘*t’ung*,’ in which form it was taken to market.⁴⁶ One commentator, who submitted samples of black tea from China found in Upper Burma (and reportedly traded as far as Tenasserim) in the 1830s, stated that the ‘mucilaginous substances’ used to form it into cakes and balls gave it a ‘peculiar flavour’ to which one could become ‘accustomed’. Its main advantage was its affordability relative to tea brought by maritime routes to the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁷ Although cakes of loosely pressed tea could also be found for sale in Burma, the ‘greater part of the tea sold in Ava, and thence carried to the lower provinces,’ was ‘in the form of hard balls, rather larger than cricket-balls,’ and was ‘the produce of the Shan states and of the hills inhabited by the people called *Paloungs*.’⁴⁸ These ‘round hard balls cemented together by paddy starch water’ were described as constituted of tea ‘of a coarse Bohea kind’ – Bohea serving as an umbrella term for black tea in the British imperial world at large, the lexicon deriving from the China trade.⁴⁹ The preparation of tea into a beverage seems to have attracted insufficient attention, probably because the method was sufficiently familiar to Western onlookers.⁵⁰ The exception was in parts of the countryside, such as the Kachin Hills, where the Singpho (Jingpo) method of decoction was ‘very simple’ and described in some detail.⁵¹

⁴⁵ *Sketch of the Singphos*, 72-73.

⁴⁶ Davies, *Yün-nan*, 97; Yule, *Mission*, 149, suggests a diameter of nine to ten inches.

⁴⁷ NAI-F, SC, 10 December 1830, Nos. 1-5, f.1616.

⁴⁸ Yule, *Mission*, 149. Note that the Palaung figure their ancestors migrated to this region in the eighteenth century (around the time of the Qing-sponsored military and civilian movement into the region), making their involvement in tea cultivation in the uplands and its sale in valley markets of relatively recent vintage, rather than part of some ‘timeless’ lifestyle often ascribed to peoples in remote places or Zomias: Giersch, *Asian Borderlands*, 22.

⁴⁹ *Sketch of the Singphos*, 72-73.

⁵⁰ See, for example the familiarity of the preparation described in: Anderson, *Mandalay to Momien*, 195.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 28. For an earlier notice of the discovery of tea in the ‘Singhpoo country’, see: NAI-F, 4 April 1838, Nos. 112-113.

In Burma, tea was not only decocted into a beverage, but also *eaten*. According to the historian, Thant Myint-U, '[d]rinking of alcohol was replaced to an extent' by the nineteenth century 'by the consumption of stimulants such as pickled tea and betel nut and the smoking of opium.'⁵² A mainstay of Burmese cuisine from 'Ava to Rangoon', *lahpet* (or variously *letpet*, *lepek*, *hlepet*, and 'wet tea' in contemporary British sources) was noted by a contemporary observer as 'much esteemed by the Burmans, being eaten on all occasions as a condiment, sometimes fried in oil with garlic.'⁵³ Another said it was made into a 'a salled of the green leaves with a little salt pepper and oil'.⁵⁴ It was a substance 'without which [...] [his informants] said they could not exist' and was reportedly 'taken in a small quantity like our cheese after Dinner & the Burmese think that it promotes digestion as well as removes the flavour of the different articles of food which they may have been eating.'⁵⁵ Such observers recounted how *lahpet* was prepared, one stating that the Palaung took 'the young twigs and leaves of the tea tree,' which were then 'subjected in large masses to a half state of fermentation by being buried in the ground in pits moistened and well pressed down,' and then 'packed into large bamboo baskets' to be taken to market. Venders sliced as much as buyers wished to purchase, so that '[k]ept thus in large masses it seems to retain its moisture, and is in appearance exactly like boiled tea leaves.'⁵⁶

It was not only the peculiar transformation from the tea plant to the teapot that marked out a distinct chain of commodification from that prevailing in the British imperial economy; the very substance itself was sometimes held to be different. In the early nineteenth century, observers (often spuriously) rejected the authenticity of tea bushes – or degraded specimens as wild and thus inferior to *Camellia sinensis* – as part of the process of creating the value of

⁵² Myint-U, *Making of Modern Burma*, 50.

⁵³ *Sketch of the Singphos*, 72-73.

⁵⁴ NAI-F, PC, 18 July 1836, Nos. 84-85, ff.12-13.

⁵⁵ NAI-F, SC, 10 December 1830, Nos. 1-5, f. 1661.

⁵⁶ *Sketch of the Singphos*, 72-73.

certain teas *qua* commodities. In tandem, there was some sniffing over the plant used in the manufacture of *lahpet*.⁵⁷ One account – published only a few decades after the transplantation of tea bushes to northeast India, when that juvenile enterprise still needed nurturing as the singular alternative to China tea and shielding from the possibility tea might grow in other places – ventured that *lahpet* was not ‘made from the true tea plant’ but from *Elaeodendron persicum*.⁵⁸ Value creation, as the next section shows, was a critically important part of the entanglement of tea and empire, even in those places and amongst those peoples marked by their alterity to the imperial commodity regime at large.

Plantations and Labour

Another natural production is the tea plant (*Camellia thea*), which grows freely on the eastern side of the hills [in the Kachin states], and suggested dreams of future tea plantations, cultivated by improved Kakhyens or imported Shans and Paloungs.⁵⁹

Soaked in language central to the plantation complex – that of modernity, natural improvement, and human progress – this excitement with undiscovered and untapped possibilities reveals how widely the tangled net of commodity, plantation, and empire were cast, even if only in the hopes of the few Englishmen who travelled to the remote uplands of the Burma-China borderland. The Kachin could be ‘improved’. The Shan and Palaung were not merely rendered as ‘labour’ but stripped of their agency into abstract units of human effort that could be ‘imported’ – moved about (against their will?) according to the logic and priorities of plantation capitalism.⁶⁰ The landscape could be transformed into one that was more productive, ignoring

⁵⁷ On the analogous relationship of discourses about technology and product quality to the creation of value and market rapport for indigo produced in Company Bengal after c. 1760, see: Prakash Kumar, *Indigo Plantations and Science in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Mandalay to Momien*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 129-30.

⁶⁰ The archive yields the case of tea being ‘made this season [in 1840] under superintendence of’ a Jingpo named ‘Gaum Ningroolee’ (the ‘Chief of Ningroolla’). The hope – relayed by an expatriate Briton – was that the tea might be sold, regarding which the government in Calcutta replied that it ‘may perhaps be well to intimate to him that the price to be paid to him in next year will be regulated by that which may be obtained this year in Calcutta

not only that it was fruitful to indigenes, but that their system of working the land was less detrimental in the long term to local ecosystems than the intensive monoculture of the seemingly innocuous and rather pleasing-sounding ‘tea garden’. In all this, therefore, was the imprint of a historical sequence of a great many enterprises, stretching from the first slave plantations either side of the Atlantic in the early modern period to those worked by free, coerced, and indentured labourers the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world, not least the most direct point of reference – the tea gardens of Assam.⁶¹

A half-century later, this vision of the future for Burma’s uplands had not come to fruition, though not for continued want of trying. A file from the archives of the erstwhile colonial Burma Government offers insight into a renewed effort of 1922 to establish a tea garden in the hills. Three men, Sir Hector Dennys, Col. Edward Coke, and Capt. J. P. Wilkins (‘a well known Indian tea planter’), wished to form a small private company. Their aim was not to establish a tea garden but to set up factories close to source where green tea leaves could be delivered to produce what they described as ‘European tea’ (i.e., the sort of preparations favoured in Europe, rather than those – described in the previous section – that serviced Burmese demand), to deal in said tea, and to do so without interfering with the production or trade of *lahpet* and Burmese dry tea for local consumption.⁶² The death of Hector Dennys was no cause for the other men to cease; within two months, it was reported that Coke and Wilkins had joined forces with a E. Beadnell (formerly employed at the British Burmah Trading

upon his present consignment’ – see: NAI-F, FC, 28 September 1840, Nos. 101-102, 1. What became of this endeavour is unclear, but it perhaps sowed the seeds of the kind of sentiments described above.

⁶¹ Kris Manjapra, ‘Plantation Disposessions. The Global Travel of Agricultural Racial Capitalism’ in *American Capitalism. New Histories*, ed. by Sven Beckert and Christine Desan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), which includes discussion on 370 that links Assam tea directly to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. See, also: Kris Manjapra, ‘Asian Plantation Histories at the Frontiers of Nation and Globalization’ *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 6 (2018), 2137-58, a review essay which takes in Jayeeta Sharma’s work, which is also discussed below. For slightly different articulations of the relationship of British industrialisation, imperialism, plantations, and capitalism: Mark Harvey, ‘Slavery, Indenture and the Development of British Industrial Capitalism’ *History Workshop Journal*, issue 88 (2019), 66-88; Zach Sell, ‘Asian Indentured Labour in the Age of African American Emancipation’ *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 91 (2017), 8-27.

⁶² NAM, Chief Secretary’s Office (British Burma), Political Department, 1922, 282B, 4481, 2.

Company Ltd) and Sao On Kya (heir of the *sawbwa* or hereditary ruler of the Shan States of Hsipaw) to form the Shan States Tea and Produce Company Ltd on Sule Pagoda Road in Rangoon.⁶³

Indirect rule – quite unlike the formal empire that existed in other locales in which Europeans spread the plantation complex (India and Ceylon, in the case of tea) – prevailed in Upper Burma. In this context, where colonial knowledge was poor and power was relatively weak and labile, indigenous powerholders became vital collaborators. The conquest of 1885 replaced rule by the Konbaung dynasty over ‘Upper Burma’ with colonial government, the former bequeathing to the latter a centralised polity in the valley with relatively looser control over the upland periphery. The Konbaung court exercised its authority by forging alliances and granting a degree of autonomy to local lords, such as the Shan *sawbwas*, and the colonial Burma Government could only ever hope to do the same, given the distance from the political centre in Rangoon (or even Mandalay), the remoteness of the country, and disinclination to establish a firmer presence in the jungle.⁶⁴ ‘These Shan sawbwas are of course British subjects and not Ruling Chiefs, but in matters of this sort’, it was concluded, ‘one generally follows Indian Political Practice.’⁶⁵ This meant drawing an equivalence between the *sawbwas* and the hereditary dynasts of India’s ‘princely states’, who relinquished foreign policy autonomy and accepted British suzerainty in return for freedom – including the sovereign powers of taxation and revenue collection – within their kingdoms.

Yet, vice versa, the proposed enterprise held the potential to enrich (and thereby draw attention to) the very collaborators upon whom the Burma government was embarrassingly dependent. Indeed, the colonial government had no objection to the commercial plans of these

⁶³ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁴ For discussion the impact of environmental and other factors on the lumpy topography of colonial sovereignty in Burma, see: Jagjeet Lally, ‘Salt and Sovereignty in Colonial Burma’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 64, no. 3 (2021), 650-73.

⁶⁵ NAM, Chief Secretary’s Office (British Burma), Political Department, 1922, 282B, 4481, 20.

men *per se*. In its characteristic small-mindedness, however, it could not allow the *sawbwa* of Hsipaw state to press his ‘pecuniary interest’ – that is, the royalty he wished to be paid by the company (his shallow and only real motive, according to the various voices that can be heard in the back and forth of the correspondence).⁶⁶ Thus, much of the file consists of communications between different layers and branches of the colonial government as it sought to wring out an answer to how much the company should pay as a royalty, whether a royalty ought to be paid at all, and whether it was improper for the *sawbwa*’s heir to be a company director and thus hold shares and receive dividend payments.⁶⁷

It was not the colonial government but the *sawbwa* who lamented the limited market opportunities for ordinary Shans within the status quo: at present, he stated, tea could be sold only four times a year and at very little profit. It was the *sawbwa* who impressed upon the colonial government, rather than vice versa, the commercial prospects to be had: were the company to be formed, local people ‘would be able to sell the picked green tea leaves for the industry when market for tea of local consumption is not so good.’ It was also the *sawbwa* who recited the language of the plantation complex, of technological modernity, natural improvement, and human progress: the establishment of the European company would allow locals to ‘learn the proper method of caring the tea plants’ so that ‘there would be an increase of produce.’ In his letter to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma, he concluded that ‘[w]ith proper caring of the plants our planters would be able to pick 9 months out of the year and when there is demand all the year round plantations would increase [...] revenue apart from the royalty offered by the would-be Company.’⁶⁸ In this last, he presented the creation of

⁶⁶ Ibid, 12.

⁶⁷ In the end, it was concluded that the Government of India had lately had no objection to an Indian ruler being granted shares in a European firm with his *Diwan* (revenue minister) as ex-officio Company director as part of the granting of a mining lease, and that, ultimately, there was little that could be done to stop the *sawbwa* from squeezing profit from European free enterprise in his territory: *ibid*, 21-22.

⁶⁸ NAM, Chief Secretary’s Office (British Burma), Political Department, 1922, 282B, 4481, 1 (Letter from Hsipaw Sawbwa, Hsaw Ke, to Lewisohn, 21 March 1922), for this and the preceding citations in this paragraph.

the company as the spark to rationalising production and land use and to disciplining labour along the lines of India's tea gardens.⁶⁹ In so doing, he strived to woo his nominal overlords by signalling the mutual benefit arising from the imbrication and compatibility of his authority with that of the colonial state, of free enterprise with colonial political economy, and of global markets with Shan life and livelihood. He sought to collaborate not only in the deliverance of imperial government, but in capitalist modernity, too.

The plantation was a mode and site of production central to the development of capitalism. The plantation – as a site of historical inquiry – is a place where the connection of empire, commodity, and race thinking can be 'seen' or made manifest. This has been brought to critical attention most recently by Kris Manjapra in what he describes as the *longue durée* history of 'racialised labour regimes' (slavery, indenture) and 'political ecologies' (plantations) from the early modern period to the twentieth century.⁷⁰ Implicit within his analysis is the notion and operation of 'whiteness', whether in Europeans' racialised ideas of alterity/difference, or in the essential form of European capital and its agency in spurring on global commodity production via systems of exploitation. In contrast, the 'failure' to establish tea gardens in the Burma uplands shows that the expansion in tandem of whiteness and exploitation was not always so seamless or successful. More importantly, 'whiteness' itself became an obstacle to the spread of the plantation complex when the latter posed a possible upset to the racial hierarchy so central to empire; hence the colonial state's distaste for the Shan *sawbwa*'s entrepreneurialism, the success of which threatened the very ideological foundations of British power.⁷¹ What Manjapra terms 'agricultural racial capitalism' possessed its limits,

⁶⁹ The subject of labour discipline in the context of India's tea garden has received considerable attention, see: above, n. 61.

⁷⁰ Manjapra, 'Plantation Disposessions', 365.

⁷¹ For racial attitudes in expatriate business and government in British India around this time, see: Maria Misra, *Business, Race, and Politics in British India c. 1850-1960* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

therefore, but these – rather tellingly – may have resulted from other overtly racialised priorities as much as other factors, such as the grip and pernicious power of race in this period.

Trade, Knowledge, and Power

Indirect rule was no obstacle to the spread of the plantation complex, therefore. Indeed, far from being a feudal lord or even the guardian of an older moral economy of custom, the Hsipaw *sawbwa* was a willing accomplice of the spread of capitalist modernity, so compelling and pervasive was its logic. Yet, the benefit that could be derived by the colonial state was greatest in areas under direct rule – that is, where it collected the land taxes, a pillar of the state's fiscal might and the lodestone of the whole edifice of the Indian Empire.⁷² Hence, it was in areas subject to direct rule that central or provincial administrations more actively encouraged the establishment of tea gardens, a means of making the land more remunerative and the people more governable – but also, as it will be shown, of addressing other, geopolitical priorities. Here, then, it is worth returning to where we started: the terrestrial trans-Eurasian tea trade. For, if tea could be grown in the 'submontane' tracts of the newly annexed province of Punjab, and if this tea could be carried through neighbouring Afghanistan to Afghan and Central Asian markets, then British (Indian) merchants might at once help provide a vent for a valuable surplus *and* keep Russia's advance into the markets and states of the Eurasian interior at bay.

Bengal (and the northeast, including Assam) were transformed from the late eighteenth century into a capitalist hub of the production and trade of certain 'global' commodities to the extent that its experience served as a precedent to be emulated in Punjab in the decade or so after the final stage of its annexation in 1849.⁷³ Before c. 1860, therefore, the Government of India solicited information about the extent of cultivation in Punjab of those crops that had

⁷² Lally, 'Salt and Sovereignty', 652.

⁷³ Jagjeet Lally, 'Trial, Error and Economic Development in Colonial Punjab: The Agri-Horticultural Society, the State and Sericulture Experiments, c. 1840-70', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2015), 1-27.

proved so instrumental to the transformation of Bengal or the larger Bengal Presidency: ‘cotton, sugarcane, country hemp, indigo, poppy (for opium)’ and, of course, tea.⁷⁴ Tea was not native to Punjab, but tea saplings had already been transferred to the Kangra valley in 1848, their growth under the care of government superintendents, first Dr Falconer and then Dr Jameson. ‘Plantations’ were established by the Punjab Government at three locations in the Kangra valley: Nagrota, Holta, and Bhawarna.⁷⁵ Just as Punjab’s new administrators strived to replicate the successes achieved in the Bengal Presidency, so did those in charge of running Punjab’s government estates mimic the strategies of their forebears in Assam. Jayeeta Sharma has revealed the shifting association of ideas about race (and racial descent), climate, and landscape in the context of Assam’s tea gardens. Of particular relevance to the present discussion is the rationale for the employment of Chinese labourers on Assam’s tea gardens in the first few decades of their history, for Chinese labourers were also ‘imported’ into the Kangra valley.

One thing that Bentinck’s Tea Committee lacked were Chinese tea plants, which were preferred as the basis of a new Indian enterprise to the un-adapted ‘wild’ variety because Assam and the entire borderland toward Yunnan was deemed uncivilised, its natural productions themselves supposedly in a ruder and less desirable state than those of China’s ancient tea hills.⁷⁶ This problem resolved itself following the infamous theft of tea seeds from China. The other problem was a lack of know-how of tea cultivation, for such knowledge was monopolised and guarded by the Chinese. Central to the new enterprise, therefore, were Chinese tea cultivators; not only would they bridge the knowledge gap, but their employment would assuage the suspicion of consumers, so synonymous had ‘tea’ and ‘China’ become in metropolitan markets. At the same time, the consumption of opium by Assamese was perceived

⁷⁴ NAI-F, Foreign, 17 September 1858, Nos. 206-209.

⁷⁵ NAI-F, FC, 25 April 1856, Nos. 164-166.

⁷⁶ The discussion in this and the following paragraph draw upon: Sharma, *Empire’s Garden*, 1-70; Neal, ‘Opium and Migration’.

to have caused the deeper descent of the hill tribes into ‘savagery’, making local labour unsuitable – it was felt – for so important a task as pioneering tea production in British India. As the forests were cleared to make way for European enterprise and Chinese expertise, so Assam’s wild ‘tea forests’ were replaced with orderly ‘tea gardens’, this seemingly subtle linguistic change signalling a more profound shift in the physical form of the landscape and the proprietary rights over its use.

Chinese were ‘sourced’ and recruited as labourers through the networks of opium trade that connected India and China, and into which the nascent tea enterprise was thoroughly embedded. Although not entirely successful, the efforts of these Chinese pioneers enabled the production of a small amount of marketable Indian tea. With the sudden growth of demand that followed, and in light of the limited numbers – and lack of any genuine experience of tea cultivation – of the Chinese procured for the commencement of the experiment, the Assam enterprise was faced with the need for more (and more skilled) Chinese tea cultivators. There resulted an influx of men, a number of whom were arrested for creating disturbances, with the overall cost of the recruitment drive rendering it a failure. Thus, use of Chinese labour was gradually phased out over the 1850s. An intervening factor was increased differentiation of local ethnic groups in the eyes of expatriate planters and officials, with some groups deemed less indolent or more suitable as labourers than others. Another factor was the rise of the indenture system that made use of local labour more expedient.

Ultimately, in this light, the recruitment of 2 Chinese (as masters) and 10 ‘native’ factory workers (as apprentices) at the government gardens in Punjab in the late 1850s looks strangely out of step with thinking in the northeast and the trajectory of Assam’s tea industry at the same time. It seems almost as if the entire precedent derived from Assam – trials and tribulations and all – had to be replicated and repeated in Kangra for similar results to be

reached.⁷⁷ Indeed, not only historical precedent but the maintenance of a connection with Chinese ‘origins’ mattered to the creation of a marketable product, as can be seen in the use of Chinese names for different types of tea produced in Punjab: ‘Souchong’, ‘Pouchong’, and ‘Bohea’.⁷⁸ By the end of the decade, 5,664 lbs. of tea was produced at a value of Rs. 8,496 (or £849), yet either lacked the marketing networks or was of insufficient quality for commercial sale, and was instead ‘made over to the Commissariat Department for the use of the European Troops.’⁷⁹ Initially, the lowest-grade teas were not deemed worth payment of transportation to markets in the Punjab Plains and it was thought they might be more profitable if sold locally, an added advantage being the fostering of a taste for tea to sustain future sales. Even the better-grade teas were deemed easier to sell to the military and the cantonment population in Jullundur than on the truly open market.⁸⁰

Yet, picking continued on the tea gardens of the Kangra Hills (and remains a significant local agro-industry today, in fact). Amritsar emerged as an entrepot of the Kangra tea business, but the trade needed nurturing, and those involved were on the lookout for suitable markets from the outset – long before brokers of Assam tea in Calcutta and the British expatriate planters themselves started to look for the ‘market at our door’, as noted in the introduction.⁸¹ Quality was a pivotal consideration, insofar as expatriate merchants and colonial officials were aware of the inferiority of their product and were searching for markets where they might offload lower-grade or surplus stock.⁸² Nepal was a good prospect, at least for nearby Kumaon

⁷⁷ NAI-F, FC, 15 April 1853, Nos. 186-88; NAI-F, FC, 25 April 1856, Nos. 164-166. The Kangra tea gardens were networked with the East India Company’s botanical garden at Saharanpur, and thus within the larger imperial networks of botanists and natural scientists.

⁷⁸ NAI-F, FC, 16 May 1856, Nos. 189-90.

⁷⁹ NAI-F, FC, 29 January 1858, Nos. 200-202; NAI-F, Foreign, 31 December 1858, Nos. 3226-3228. The former notes that the tea was produced at the Holta Factory (near Palampur).

⁸⁰ NAI-F, FC, 14 November 1856, Nos. 230-232.

⁸¹ NAI-F, FC, 27 May 1853, Nos. 307-210, which reveals that hopes for sales were pinned squarely on the presence of Kashmiris in Punjab, for they were observed to be tea drinkers already.

⁸² See, for instance, the interest expressed by Calcutta merchants via government to this extent: NAI-F, General A, March 1882, Nos. 52-54. See: Lutgendorf, ‘Making Tea’, for the larger efforts of Calcutta merchants to this end around the fin de siècle.

(rather than Kangra) tea planters: not only was tea widely consumed, but it was ‘*poor stuff*’ and the price *high*’, suggesting good inroads could be made by merchants.⁸³ Some reports claimed that Afghans drank ‘the ordinary China green tea imported in large quantities by Kurrachee’, others venturing that ‘China tea of the finer, light coloured kinds [...] *alone* find favour with the Afghans, Persians, Uzbaks and Turkomans,’ but it was widely opined that there was a market for coarse Indian (brick) teas wherever and among whomever could not afford to drink the fine ‘Chah-i Sabz’ (green China tea), including among the Hazara or in Turkestan and northern Iran.⁸⁴

About twenty years after Lumley had advocated for the encouragement of entrepreneurial merchants to take Punjab teas to Central Asia, in spring 1882, the provincial government reported to the centre that samples of Indian brick tea prepared in Calcutta had been sent to the commissioners of the Punjab districts of Amritsar, Peshawar, and Rawalpindi, but also directly to an Afghan merchant. The aim was to entice the ‘principle merchants’ into disposing of this sort of Indian tea in markets in Afghanistan, Chinese Turkestan, and Tibet.⁸⁵ A rapid response came from the Afghan-Baluch frontier: the Kandahari merchants were unimpressed by the samples, namely because of their preference for *green* tea (the sample was black), although there was a strong possibility it might find sale in Nepal and possibly Tibet.⁸⁶ A gloomier tally followed in October from a number of merchants – such as Lala Sant Ram, Rai Kalian Singh, and Mian Sharaf Din, who had agents in Kabul, Kashgar, and Bukhara – casting ‘doubt [on] the probability of success in any attempts to introduce the brick-tea into the countries in question.’ This was on the grounds of the cost of the tea from Calcutta, relative to

⁸³ NAI-F, General A, March 1882, No.50-55, Frontmatter. For similar reasons, perhaps, Kumaon tea was less extensively traded to central Asia – or exertions made to that effect – than Kangra tea: NAI-F, Secret F, May 1888, No.40, 18.

⁸⁴ Citations, respectively, from: NAI-F, General A, March 1882, No.50, 1; NAI-F, Secret F, May 1888, No.40, 21.

⁸⁵ NAI-F, General A, March 1882, No. 50-55.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

the cheap tea of Kangra, and the strangling of the market by Russian tariffs on Indian goods.⁸⁷ Another note followed from Peshawar in mid-1883 containing evidence supplied by a merchant indicating (overstating, perhaps?) how dire the situation had become.⁸⁸ Attempts to entice merchants plying routes via Kashmir to Yarkand and Kashgar similarly met with little success.⁸⁹

In other words, Kangra tea – like other merchandise making it across the Indo-Afghan frontier and onward to the oasis states around this time – only continued to find sale because of its cheapness, and the ability of merchants to turn a (slender) profit in the face of tariffs.⁹⁰ Price data collected by a ‘native agents’ of the British Indian government operating in Central Asia in c. 1870 suggests that Punjab teas were 53 to 100 per cent of the value of the varieties brought by Russian merchants, and as much as half the cost of the most expensive varieties and twice that of the cheapest black tea brought by Indian merchants.⁹¹ As for tariffs, the problem was twofold, insofar as goods transported by caravan were liable to pay duties in two jurisdictions between India and markets of the continental interior. This was a sore point, for Afghanistan had been transformed into a British dependency yet the British Indian government could do little but investigate the Afghan ruler’s exactions, which they did – and thoroughly.⁹² The more they knew, the more frustrated they became, however, for there was little scope for actual intervention toward the betterment of trade.

⁸⁷ NAI-F, Secret E, October 1882, Nos. 186-201, 22-23.

⁸⁸ NAI-F, S.E., October 1882, No. 313, 4. *C.f.* the schedule of taxes on dues through Afghanistan to Bukhara found in: NAI-F, Secret F, May 1888, No. 40.

⁸⁹ NAI-F, General A, April 1882, Nos. 3-4. Contrast this with the optimism for such endeavours of a decade prior described in: Lally, *Silk Roads*, 169-70. That said, even then it was noted that the journey from Punjab was difficult and the logistics complex, constraining the scope of trade: NAI-F, Secret, April 1874, Nos. 52-54, 3-4.

⁹⁰ Lally, *Silk Roads*, 217-56. The advantage of cheapness is not to suggest that drinkers in Central Asia became any less discriminating; it was noted that they continued to prefer teas of quality: NAI-F, Secret F, August 1891, Nos. 180-183, 117.

⁹¹ See: NAI-F, S.I., 1870, Nos. 90-96, 6-7, which includes the names of various varieties and which notes that the prices are subject to the vicissitudes occasioned by the upheaval accompanying the conquest.

⁹² A delegate of the Kangra, Kumaon, and Dehra Dun (Almora) tea planters – Leslie Rogers – also pressed the Government of India to take action on this matter: NAI-F, Frontier, May 1891, Nos. 12-13, Part B.

Tea from Kiakhta was imported duty-free into this space from 1869, whereas other tea was subject to tariffs.⁹³ Thus began suspicion, which only intensified as inquiry into the matter was deepened in the 1880s, that Russia was determined to ruin trade with British India, with the volume of goods brought from Punjab steadily dropping off in consequence.⁹⁴ That tea was not a homogenous substance, and the varieties brought by Russian merchants deemed inferior to those sold through networks reaching into north India and the Indian Ocean, only seemed to underscore to British officialdom the perniciousness of Russian policy.⁹⁵ That said, tea was among those goods coming from British India that were not actually prohibited (others being muslin and indigo, which were without close substitute and deemed necessities), merely subject to a duty payment, although at a rate sufficient for one Indian merchant to lament a likely ‘loss of some five or six lakhs.’⁹⁶ The restrictions, moreover, only applied to areas now subject to Russian authority. Elsewhere in the Eurasian interior – in Chinese Turkestan, Tibet, and Mongolia – Russians and Russian subjects seemed to be making more headway than British (Indians), the latter (unfairly) despaired as unenterprising.⁹⁷

It is significant that the Quarter-Master General (or his deputy), architect of what has been called the ‘imperial security state’, was the author of numerous documents from which evidence has been drawn in this section. This fact signals the indivisibility of international trade and politics.⁹⁸ Indeed, when news came of the confiscation of Indian tea from merchants in Yarkand, and reports that tea brought by Russian (Andijani) and Chinese merchants continued to find sale unimpeded, a lengthy correspondence ensued between officials working within the

⁹³ NAI-F, SH, 1869, Nos. 28-29.

⁹⁴ NAI-F, S.E., October 1882, No. 200, 29.

⁹⁵ NAI-F, S.I., 1870, Nos.90-96, 6-7.

⁹⁶ NAI-F, S.E., October 1882, Nos. 186-201, 4-5 and 25. See, also: NAI-F, A.Pol.E., September 1883, Nos. 300-302, frontmatter, 1.

⁹⁷ NAI-F, Secret F, May 1888, No. 40, 1-4. For a report by Faiz Buksh into Russian trade into these markets, including the operations of one Nimchinoff Koffs and his agents – who traded in tea and other goods in Chinese Turkestan, and who were believed to be operating under the aegis of the Russian governor of Turkestan – see: NAI-F, Secret, September 1872, Nos. 193-194, especially 20-22. For details of special measures to encourage Russian trade into Chinese Turkestan, see: NAI-F, Secret F, October 1894, Nos. 76-81.

⁹⁸ Lally, *Silk Roads*, 187-95.

various levels of the state (local, provincial, central) and branches of government (finance, frontier administration, political), as well as the government's extraterritorial officers and Indian subjects plying the trade routes to Chinese Turkestan, into the precise nature, purpose, and motivation of the confiscation as well as whether and how to retaliate. The flurry generated by the back and forth of paperwork broached not only Russia's advance into such markets and its guiding hand in this matter, but also the relationship of Yarkand's administration to the Qing Empire (which had recently defeated the Russian-backed and short-lived ruler of an autonomous khanate, thereby returning Qing rule to the region). This last pivoted to the larger question of British rights of access to the Chinese interior for trade via the long, landward Indian border vis-à-vis that of her Russian and French rivals in central Asia and southeast Asia, respectively, in the wake of those treaties struck following China's defeat in the Opium Wars.⁹⁹ The confiscation of a consignment of India tea thus escalated into crucial matters of geopolitics.

Conclusion

This chapter was written against the backdrop of the global COVID-19 pandemic and it would be remiss, therefore, not to mention the ricochet of news between Hong Kong, Kashgar, Kabul, and Calcutta of an outbreak of plague in China in 1894. Notes made in archives in 2012 and 2014 suddenly reverberate in 2020 because of the uncanny resemblance of concerns expressed over a century apart. In 1894, contemporaries raised concern over the tea caravans serving as vectors of plague, and the use of quarantine as a contrivance to shut out British (Indian) trade. In 2020, voices within governments and publics around the globe have worried about mobility and have variously 'blacklisted' certain countries as part of 'travel bans', not to mention the piquing of xenophobia and racism in public life and discourse. Indeed, for better or worse,

⁹⁹ NAI-F, Frontier A, December 1888, Nos. 106-133. Scope for retaliation, it was noted, was negligible and likely to be counterproductive. Smuggling, moreover, negated the extent of the problem: NAI-F, Secret F, January 1894, Nos. 337-352.

many of us have developed a heightened sense that trade is not merely a matter of geopolitics, for we are alive to the myriad ways globalisation is connected to the biopolitical and how debates over trade and migration are sometimes a little more than tinged by a sense of racial difference or a desire for race-based exclusion. Such connection of commodity, empire, and the biopolitical certainly merits more attention from historians, therefore. Sujit Sivasundaram's recent 'pre-history' of COVID-19 – of zoonotic transfer from pangolins to humans, of its location within patterns of interaction between colonisation, capitalism, and settlement – offers a glimpse of the power of such analysis, fundamentally linked as it is to the history and present-day reality of the climate emergency.¹⁰⁰

A related matter concerns race or racial(ised) difference and its entanglement with empire and commodity, even such a commodity as tea, exploration of which constitutes one of three larger contributions of this chapter. The domestication of particular aspects of Chinese tea-drinking culture within western Europe meant that Britons were stunned by very different modes of tea consumption and their associated material cultures in such locales as Upper Burma, contemporaries' descriptions thus tinged with a sense of 'otherness'. Race was also entangled in the spread of the plantation complex around the globe. Racial capitalism and its institutions, however, found advocates not only among Europeans but also their indigenous collaborators, as we have seen. Unsettled, perhaps, by this appropriation (and subversion?) of a White technology, the British halted the advance of plantations in Upper Burma in the instance reviewed, above.

A larger contribution of this chapter regards knowledge. Once the gauntlet had been laid down to study the 'social lives of things', scholars began teasing apart the issues attending on such an enterprise.¹⁰¹ One is methodological: *how* do we study the social lives of things?

¹⁰⁰ Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Viewpoint: The Human, the Animal, and the Prehistory of Covid-19', *Past and Present*, no. 249 (2020), 295-316.

¹⁰¹ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Another is epistemological-ontological: *what* exactly is the (immutable?) ‘thingness’ of commodities, *materia*, artworks, etc, in circulation? – *wherein* does it reside? – *how* does it come to be (known)? Scholars have paid considerable attention to how the identity or essence – for example, the uses, meanings, and significations – of things were constructed within particular contexts, and how they were altered as they moved from one context to another (not to mention in consequence of the very act of mobility itself). Tracing the circulation of an artwork represents a rather different endeavour to studying the history of a commodity and its social lives, however. The latter runs the risk of becoming part of the process of commodification itself, rather than remaining aloof from it: far from merely revealing the historical process by which a substance was rendered into a stable or uniform ‘thing’ transformed through market exchange into a ‘commodity’, scholarly knowledge production risks becoming an act of reproducing, and thereby reifying, the transformation of substance into commodity.¹⁰² This is achieved, often entirely inadvertently, by taking for granted the very thingness of a substance or because of a tendency toward backward induction – a retracing of the steps by which cocoa, tea, indigo, rubber, jute, or oil became global commodities *par excellence*. By staring this problem in the face, we might begin to prospect forwards (instead of retracing backward), examine other trajectories (than the master narratives of particular commodity histories), and take alternative vantage points or bring into view a range of other actors (the ‘subalterns’, perhaps, to those prescribed by the itineraries and identities embedded within the master narratives). In so doing, we may not only come to see how commodity histories are entangled with empire in an empirical-historical sense, but in methodological and epistemological-ontological terms, too.

¹⁰² That said, tracing the life of an artwork can flesh out its provenance, the result of which can be to create or alter market value.

By focussing on Sino-Russian tea trade networks and Burmese modes of tea production, consumption, and material culture, this chapter has sought to make such an intervention. Tea journeyed in different directions to numerous locales and was – as it travelled and at the point of consumption – hardly a singular substance, for it was constituted into a variety of preparations (loose leaf, bricks, discs, dry, wet) and was in some places chewed and eaten rather than brewed and drunk. The analysis calls to issue the connection of substance, empire, world economy, commodity (and commodification), consumption, and material culture into single, neat narratives or works of global history. It suggests a tapestry woven from the multiplicity of the material lives of commodities such as tea, with such closer focus disturbing and even deconstructing the coherence of ‘commodity’ and the ‘global’ as conceptual categories. By turning to – and traversing – the frontiers of British rule in Asia, furthermore, this chapter also interrogates the value of focussing on ‘empire’. The frontier was a place where imperial power was more fragile and fissiparous and the state and its officials relatively impoverished of information. The process of expansion toward and within the frontier necessarily improved the stock of knowledge about the Eurasian interior (including its markets and economic potential) and of Russian imperial advances. This material and epistemological advance brought matters of tea production, trade and exchange networks, and consumption to the attention of British officials. Yet, tea was also conceived as a *means* of advancing British power – or at least stymying the advances of rivals – within this space. Tellingly of this particular relation of commodity and empire, the data on matters relating to the trans-Eurasian tea trade and the promotion of Indian teas within Central Asia were collected at the behest of the intelligence branch of the British Indian state. Tea and British imperial ambition were in such connexion that tea could become one of the objects of trade war, as the latter parts of this chapter demonstrate, such rivalry *between* empires forcing us beyond the imperial domain and into a trans-imperial and global space. Thinking with a framework or

terrain of analysis that is not narrowly bounded by *an* empire, but brings into view the spaces between and across empires, is another contribution of this chapter.