FRAGRANT FRONTIER

Global Spice Entanglements from the Sino-Vietnamese Uplands

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CHAPTER 7

Marketing makeovers and mismatches of Vietnam's quintessential spices

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INTRODUCTION

As spices are marketed internationally their visual and textual representations often take on the aura of the locations where they are cultivated and the cultures of those growing them. We know of green cardamom from the fragrant hills of northern India, of cloves from the Moluccas 'spice islands' (Maluku Islands), and hand-picked saffron from Iran. On a North American food co-operative website 'Welcome to the Table' we observe images of ethnic minority Yao (Dao) cultivators in northern Vietnam wearing beautiful embroidered clothes while carrying large rolls of *Cinnamomum cassia* (referred to locally as 'cinnamon'; see Chapter 4) from their fields. A National Geographic writer similarly illustrates his work with a whimsical image of a Hmong farmer's weathered hands and traditional hemp clothes dyed blue with indigo as he tends to his cardamom plants in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands (Teh, n.d.). Meanwhile, on their online marketing website, a Vietnamese spice company Agrideco Vietnam, displays a photo of two carefully balanced and beautifully crafted wooden cooking spoons lying on a bed of perfectly coloured, whole star anise (Agrideco Vietnam Co. Ltd., n.d.),. While the use of such imagery is meant to inspire us to enjoy homemade mulled wine, bake cinnamon buns, or attempt to recreate the heavily scented broth of *phở*, it tells us very little about where these spices come from. Who are the people growing, processing, and trading cinnamon, black cardamom, and star anise? How do these spices become commodities and how are they marketed as they move from the Sino-Vietnamese uplands to global consumer markets? To what degree are the livelihoods of those cultivating these spices taken into consideration regarding the process of commodification and marketing?

And what do current circumstances tell us about how commodities become fetishised – or perhaps how are they *de*-commodified or *de*-fetishised in different parts of the chain?

The concepts of the commodity and fetishism are of course closely rooted in Marxist analysis. In his first volume of *Capital*, Marx argues that the concept of 'fetishism' allows the social relations and processes through which a commodity comes to exist to be concealed or obscured (Marx, 1976 [1867]). He suggests: 'The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this' (ibid.: 165). He goes on to label this as fetishism, noting: 'I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities' (ibid.). As Gunderson (2014: 109–110) elaborates: 'The importance of these insights for Marx and the development of Marxist theory is that the commodity form and relations rooted in commodity production transform people into things'. Building on these ideas, radical geographers such as David Harvey (1990: 423) call for the need to 'get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market'. This allows one to 'make powerful, important, disturbing connections between Western consumers and the distant strangers whose contributions to their lives were invisible, unnoticed, and largely unappreciated' (Cook, 2004: 642). Following this line of argument, Allen and Kovach (2000) propose the concept of 'de-fetishisation', suggesting that marketing approaches such as organic labelling or fair-trade can bring attention again to the 'real' commodity chains and actors involved in the movement and processes that bring food to kitchen tables, especially to concerned consumers in the Global North. More recently, however, others have reasoned that such approaches, while raising awareness, do little to actually remove the structural forces that continue to promote the maximisation of profits and constantly expanding production (Gunderson, 2014). Such debates are highly relevant in the case of the three spices we focus on here.

Meanwhile, with their feet firmly rooted on the ground rather than following such theoretical debates, thousands of ethnic minority individuals and households in Vietnam's northern borderlands are diversifying their livelihoods as the impacts of state-supported agrarian transitions, market integration, and increasing extreme weather events impact their on- and off-

farm livelihood options (Turner et al., 2015). While many of these ethnic minorities were traditionally semi-subsistence farmers who periodically engaged in small-scale trade, using their profits to purchase farming equipment, medicines, kerosene, food for special occasions, and small treats, nowadays farmers find themselves increasingly in need of cash, given the rapid changes occurring across these borderlands (Sowerwine, 2011). As noted in earlier chapters, this cash is necessary to purchase farming inputs, especially hybrid rice and maize seeds which are being strongly promoted by the Vietnamese state, as well as to pay for the rising costs of children's education, hospital and other medical expenses, and additional changing needs (Bonnin and Turner, 2012). Since the 1980s, the range and scale of cash crops grown across the northern borderlands have accordingly expanded, with some options being strongly supported by the state, especially in tandem with reforesting 'bare hills' programs, as has been the case with 'cinnamon' trees (McElwee, 2009). Local communities are experimenting with other potential cash sources more independently, such as black cardamom, while a few cash crops such as star anise, have withstood numerous political systems over time, with farmers regarding them as stable 'back-up measures' for cash income when needed.

In this chapter our aim is to analyse how 'cinnamon' (or most likely *C. cassia*), black cardamom, and star anise are marketed and promoted by three key groups of actors *beyond* the farm gate, namely Vietnamese state officials, Vietnam-based exporting companies, and overseas importing and retail companies. While doing so, we also investigate the degree to which the strategies of these groups align or differ, and the impacts this might have on the farmers of these spices. While the Vietnamese state increasingly focuses on promoting 'geographical indications' (GIs) for marketing 'cinnamon' and star anise in particular, supporting their cultivation in specific upland districts, we find that marketing strategies in the Global North rely on completely different tactics. Indeed, even Vietnam-based exporters appear to be ignoring the Vietnamese government's GI labels, leading us to question the merit of GIs in supporting spice cultivators and their livelihoods. This returns us to our discussion regarding the degree to which de-fetishisation or de-commodification occurs through different marketing approaches for these spices.

After a brief overview of our methods next, we outline the conceptual framing for this chapter. This framing draws on a systems of provision commodity chain approach to illuminate the construction of value and the importance of studying the final commodity nodes of distribution,

retail, and consumption. This approach also highlights meaningful debates concerning the de-commodification of different 'things', especially food. We then briefly review the processes and actors transferring the spice crops from Vietnam's northern uplands to local traders and exporters. These insights – corresponding to the initial nodes of the spices' respective commodity chains – have been detailed in Chapters 2 for star anise, 3 for cardamom, and 4 for 'cinnamon', and hence are only briefly recapped here, operating as the contextual backdrop to the arguments we advance. Our results then focus on the commodity chain processes moving these spices from farmer to consumer, and on the complex 'makeovers' and forms of value creation the spices undergo en route. These mid- and end-chain commodity nodes are vital to the ability of ethnic minority farmers to trade their spices but have not been systematically documented to date, remaining something of an analytical 'black box'. Concentrating on the Vietnam-rooted commodity chains to keep our analysis manageable, we evaluate the actions and priorities of key players, including Vietnamese state officials, Vietnam-based exporting companies, and overseas importing and retail companies and stores. We conclude by reflecting upon the implications of the divergences in the marketing and promotional approaches of these key players for ethnic minority cultivators.

The initial part of our analysis is partly based on ethnographic data previously collected by Sarah Turner and Annuska Derks in the provinces of Lạng Sơn (star anise) and Yên Bái ('cinnamon'), and by Sarah Turner in Lào Cai (black cardamom). Moreover, we draw insights from interview data with four exporters and over 40 ethnic majority Kinh retail traders of the three spices in Hanoi; with 25 retailers outside Vietnam (in Bangkok, Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Auckland, Montréal, New York, and Zurich); with Global North importing and retail company representatives; and with the author of an Asian cook book (also a former restaurant critic). Our core analysis, however, is based on our content analysis of export and retail marketing websites that claim to sell these three Vietnam-sourced spices (although not necessarily exclusively). This includes 40 websites selling Vietnam-sourced 'cinnamon', 40 websites selling Vietnam-sourced star anise, and 29 websites selling Vietnam-sourced black cardamom (the total number that we could find for the latter).

Our initial 'deep dive' into possible marketing websites focused on companies based in Vietnam, Europe, North America, and China. We used multiple different search engines depending on country or region (e.g. Chinese

Table 7.1. Numbers of marketing websites analysed, based in four countries/regions.

	Black Cardamom Retailers	**'Cinnamon' Retailers**	**Star Anise Retailers**	**Total per region**
Vietnam	10	10	10	30
China	4	10	10	24
North America	5	10	10	25
Europe	10	10	10	30
Total per spice	29	40	40	**109 Sites Total**

A few of the websites changed between our first time accessing them and when we returned for cross-checking. Our analyses thus refer to the images and textual content of websites when we first accessed them, having cut and copied these visual and textual data to Excel files at that time.

search engine Baidu) and targeted ten languages (English and French, which we speak, as well as Spanish, Italian, Swedish, German, Finnish, Norwegian, Vietnamese, and 'Simplified Chinese', all with the help of Google Translate). We used precise wording in each of our searches, always combining the name of the spice with Vietnam, and either the word 'buy' or the word 'purchase'. When switching between languages, we tried to include close translations of the following keywords: Vietnam, Vietnamese, buy, black cardamom, star anise, cinnamon, *C. cassia*, North America, Europe, China. In order to change the location we were searching, we adjusted the settings of our search engine to focus our results on that specific country/region. We examined the first ten retail websites listed for each spice, per region, and we selected only those that either advertised the product as Vietnamese or listed Vietnam as the place of origin of the spice. We also made sure to avoid any sponsored advertisements.[1] We analysed 109 retail websites in total based in four countries/regions, which comprised ten websites based in each of the four for 'cinnamon' and star anise (40 total websites for each spice) and a total of 29 websites for black cardamom (Table 7.1).[2]

1 We relied on Google's ranking of sites for this section, which is based on a broad array of algorithms that determine which web pages rank the highest for specific search terms.

2 Although we spent over 40 hours of searching for more retail websites selling Vietnamese black cardamom, we were not able to find further sites. Evidently Vietnamese 'cinnamon' and star anise are more widely traded on the global market than Vietnamese cardamom.

CONCEPTUALISING THE (DE-)COMMODIFICATION OF SPICES

Commodity chain analyses provide scope for us to focus on the complex socio-economic networks and relationships among actors as a commodity moves from production to consumption, as detailed in Chapter 2. In this chapter, we draw on the systems of provision approach, which emphasises the range of relations and connections between initial production and final consumption nodes, concentrating on the different ways by which meaning is ascribed to 'things' along the way by different actors involved (Fine and Leopold, 1993). Authors employing a systems of provision approach maintain that it allows one to focus more intently on the cultural aspects of production and consumption than a number of other commodity chain approaches to date (Goodman, 2002; Craviotti, 2016). This consideration of commodities' 'horizontal dimensions' of provision proves especially helpful for our study, permitting us to focus on evaluating and comparing the diverse processes and actors involved at one specific node across comparative commodity chains. Taking the example of our case study, this allows for a careful analysis of how one spice is marketed in different locales and the specific (de-)commodification and value creation processes involved, while also allowing for comparisons across spices.

Bidwell et al. (2018a) assert that there are two ways to interpret the concept of de-commodification. First, and closely following Marxist arguments, the aim of de-commodification is, as Harvey notes, to 'remove the veil' that is formed by market capitalism, and, in so doing, to make the social and ecological origins of food products visible (Bidwell et al., 2018a). By revealing the 'hidden geographies of food, these networks enable the ethical motivations of consumers … to support more equitable and sustainable conditions of production and trade' (ibid.: 2). We suggest that this approach is fairly similar to the concept of 'de-fetishisation', given its close links to Marxist thought. Bidwell et al. (2018a) go on to argue that a second interpretation is further removed from neoclassical understandings of commodities 'as undifferentiated products which must compete largely on price. From this perspective, the objective of de-commodification is to differentiate and add value to products, allowing them to compete based on quality and identity' (ibid.: 2). It is this second, slightly broader interpretation of de-commodification that we believe is more useful in understanding the marketing

approaches of Vietnamese state officials and Vietnam-based and overseas companies. As Bidwell et al. (2018a: 2) add: 'This second sense emphasises the agency of peripheral actors in mobilising local resources and traditions to differentiate their products'.

Constructing 'socially responsible' foods that are marketed as being environmentally or socially sustainable represents one approach to the de-commodification of agro-food products that retailers frequently draw upon to differentiate food items (Arce and Marsden, 1993; West, 2010). Writing about the market for fair-trade coffee, for instance, West (2010: 693) contends that the fair-trade approach 'attempts to merge seemingly disparate strands of consumer life: economic choice, political action, and identity production'.

A second way that agro-food products are marketed, which is also often employed by those creating 'socially responsible' food items, is through their association with specific ethnicities or cultures. Such strategies appeal to imaginary understandings of 'authenticity' that often rely on reductive and stereotypical representations of cultures (Foster, 2006). Products such as coffee, cacao, and quinoa have often been traditional foods of a specific culture long before they were appropriated by the mainstream and transformed into transnational commodities (Arce and Marsden, 1993; Lind and Barham, 2004). A third and closely related way that agro-foods are marketed is by their symbolic attachment to place. Indeed, Hull (2016: 125–116) argues that 'consumers assign value to products based on their place of origin', adding that 'Western companies frequently attempt to profit by association with the "traditional" products and methods of non-Western cultures and places'. Geographic indications are such a means by which commodities can be branded with exoticised images of a specific culture and place (ibid.).

Significantly, there is often a large disjuncture between the meanings and values that consumers and producers attach to food commodities (West, 2002). Although commodities 'retain … their material attributes' (West, 2002: 24), they are reconstituted with new messages and meanings by the types of processes outlined above. As such, we draw on these conceptual ideas to undertake a series of horizontal analyses at the final commodity nodes of the three spices upon which this collection focuses, drawing on the systems of provision approach to commodity chain analysis. Moreover, we want to better understand how and to what degree these spices are assigned specific values and transformed by different actors. Namely, to what degree

are these spices de-commodified in order to meet the assumed expectations of Global North consumers at their final commodity node?

CONTEXT: INITIAL BORDERLAND COMMODITY CHAIN NODES

As detailed in Chapter 3, and thus just briefly reiterated here, black cardamom continues to be an important export crop from the northern upland provinces of Vietnam, primarily cultivated by ethnic minority Hmong and Yao farmers (see also Turner et al., 2015). In general, these communities have integrated black cardamom into their livelihood strategies as a means of diversifying their sources of capital (Rousseau et al., 2019). As Vietnam has advanced along its transition to a market economy, ethnic minority farmers who have typically led semi-subsistence livelihoods have found themselves increasingly needing cash resources. Because of the high demand and high value of black cardamom, the crop has afforded farmers some security when their households are experiencing food shortages, and it has also provided them with the financial resources to purchase industrial farming inputs and to cover other new expenses. An important factor that explains the continuing popularity of black cardamom cultivation within the region is that it requires comparatively little labour or fertiliser compared to other cash crops; nonetheless, as noted in both Chapters 3 and 5, an increase in extreme weather events in the region has been causing considerable concerns for cultivators.

As detailed in Chapter 4, for some ethnic minority farmers situated in the Vietnamese provinces of Yên Bái, Thanh Hóa, and Quảng Nam, the cultivation of 'cinnamon' has become an important component of their livelihood diversification strategies. Specifically, for ethnic minority Yao and Tày, and to a lesser extent Hmong and majority Kinh, 'cinnamon' has been planted to generate income and supplement subsistence forms of agriculture. Indeed, while these groups have historically relied on rice for their personal consumption, they have increasingly engaged in animal husbandry and growing cash crops as the country has transitioned to a market economy, with 'cinnamon' gaining importance since the 1990s as a result of state policies encouraging its cultivation.

Turning to star anise, as outlined in Chapter 2, thousands of ethnic minority farmers have traditionally grown star anise as part of their composite livelihood strategies within the northern Vietnamese provinces of Lạng

Sơn, Quảng Ninh, Cao Bằng, and Bắc Kạn. Significantly, over 70 per cent of Vietnam's star anise is grown within the province of Lạng Sơn, where ethnic minority Nùng and Tày are the most populous ethnic groups. For these inhabitants, star anise has been an important agricultural product alongside the staple crops of rice and maize, as well as other trees like pine, persimmon, plum, and peach. While fruit and pine trees have offered a greater source of revenue in the short term, star anise has been viewed as a reliable long-term source of income. Yet, as noted in Chapter 4, variations in global market prices for star anise in recent decades have resulted in important income fluctuations for cultivators.

CLASHING VISIONS IN MARKETING MAKEOVERS

Take 1. Geographical indications: Enthusiastic state officials versus ambivalent farmers

Geographical indications (GI) are 'place-based names' adopted to communicate 'the geographical origin, as well as the cultural and historical identity' of commodities (Bowen and Zapata, 2009: 108). These could – theoretically – be considered an ideal way by which local communities could lead attempts at de-commodification (Bidwell et al., 2018b). Moreover, different multi-lateral organisations and non-government organisations (NGOs) have increasingly supported GIs in recent years as a means by which Global South commodities can be promoted for Global North consumers while socio-economic development is – theoretically – improved for Global South farmers and producers. In Vietnam, this approach of associating specific products with specific places and peoples has been embraced by a number of influential officials (UNCTAD, 2015; Pick et al., 2017). Pick et al. (2017: 306) note that 'the Vietnamese legal framework for the protection of GIs provides for a State-driven, top-down management of GIs that is supported by strong public policies'. Not surprisingly therefore, GIs have become increasingly common in the country, including for Lạng Sơn star anise (since 2007), 'cinnamon' from one district in Yên Bái Province (since 2010), as well as for other upland commodities such as seedless persimmon from Bắc Kạn Province, and honey from Mèo Vạc District, Hà Giang Province (Pick et al., 2017).

The officials interviewed about the GI schemes in both Lạng Sơn Province (for star anise) and Yên Bái Province (for 'cinnamon') were very

enthusiastic about the fact that their local spice had gained this recognition and argued that it was an important step in the marketing of such products overseas. As one official in Lạng Sơn Province noted: 'The geographical indication for our star anise is very important. It shows we have a very high quality product and that it's better than star anise from China. People here know that, of course, but now people overseas will learn this too' (Interview, 2016). Similarly, in Yên Bái Province, an official explained: 'This is a big deal for our cinnamon. It will make people around the world know more about cinnamon from here and want to buy it' (Interview, 2017).

Despite this enthusiasm among officials, farmers cultivating these spices were only occasionally aware of, or interested in, the GI possibilities when interviewed. In Lạng Sơn Province, farmers were less than impressed with government efforts to date to support their star anise-based livelihoods. Having survived the price fluctuations brought about by the Tamiflu boom and bust (see Chapter 2), they preferred to rely on their own trade connections and established links than on the government. As one farmer put it: 'The government hasn't really helped us at all. They push this new GI thing, and have done some advertising, but they don't really help us. Maybe they help bigger farmers and wholesalers, but not small-sized growers like me' (Interview, 2016). In Yên Bái Province, the GI is only applicable to 'cinnamon' grown in one specific district, Văn Yên. A farmer from that district who sold sizeable quantities of 'cinnamon' sticks each year as well as leaves and small twigs for oil, declared: 'I don't really know much about the GI. Somebody told me a bit about it, but I don't really see what difference it makes to me. I already have good connections to the people I trade with; why would I change that? They give me a fair price already' (Interview, 2017). Only one 'cinnamon' farmer interviewed from outside Văn Yên District was aware of the GI but, noting that it did not apply to his land, he said it was of no value to him anyway. Other farmers growing one of these spices either did not see the relevance of a GI for their livelihoods given the trade connections they had already established, or remained unaware of the programme.

Notably, black cardamom has not been registered for a GI. According to Lào Cai provincial officials, this was because black cardamom is a shrub grown under forest cover and is often found in Nature Reserves or National Parks, where it is therefore cultivated illegally. One official in Sapa District, Lào Cai Province explained: 'Well, I understand the cinnamon GI as it's grown on people's land in a legal way and they have the right to grow the

trees, but black cardamom is a shrub and the people here [ethnic minority farmers] don't own the land and shouldn't be growing it; this is forest land' (Interview, 2019). This same official went on to stress: 'We should focus on state-promoted crops for this region instead; it's better for everyone' (Interview, 2019).

Given these disparate opinions from local farmers and state officials regarding how worthwhile it is to cultivate star anise and 'cinnamon' GIs, we were curious about the degree to which these GIs are drawn upon at the export nodes of the commodity chains of these two spices, and whether the GIs appear 'on the radar' for Global North consumers. With no GI for black cardamom, we were also interested in whether its geographical origin and the ethnicity of its cultivators feature in how this spice is marketed internationally.

Take 2. Strategies of Vietnam-based exporters: Showcasing staff and facilities

Although it has been impossible to gain detailed accounts of export quantities and profits due to fears over 'trade secrets' being stolen, interviews with local traders and exporters in Vietnam highlight the fact that most black cardamom and star anise grown in the northern uplands of Vietnam is sold directly to wholesalers in China. For black cardamom, this is predominantly to traders in Yunnan Province, and for star anise, to traders in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

For black cardamom, Kinh wholesalers in Lào Cai city, located directly on the Sino-Vietnamese borderline, are key nodes in these commodity chains. These wholesalers purchase their supplies from a number of smaller-scale Kinh, Tày, and Giáy traders based in small upland towns or villages, buying directly from local farmers. These small-scale traders have built up and maintain strong relationships of trust with farmers and will sometimes purchase black cardamom in advance for credit, to help farmers through leaner food supply months. In turn, Lào Cai City wholesalers enjoy privileged access to information on market prices and trends for black cardamom in China, creating important profit opportunities for them.

In the case of star anise, it is mostly local Tày and Kinh intermediaries who collect star anise from farmers, or farmers travelling with their stock to larger wholesalers in Lạng Sơn City. As star anise passes through the hands of intermediaries and larger-scale wholesalers, it is processed for domestic or overseas distribution. In some instances, wholesalers trade directly with

buyers at Chinese border crossings. More often, however, the star anise travels to Hanoi where trade companies prepare it to be exported. At this stage, a large portion is processed into essential oil through steam-distilling. Small quantities of whole star anise are sold to Singapore, India, Thailand, Bangladesh, Turkey, the US, and the UK, while the majority is traded to China, the largest supplier of star anise worldwide.

The export routes for Yên Bái 'cinnamon' are more varied than for the other two spices, and while exports to China are important, there are also notable trade routes via Hanoi to Singapore and then on to global markets, as well as direct routes from Vietnam to India. The quality of the bark largely determines the destination of the commodity. The highest-grade bark is usually exported to Western countries and a few select importers in Asia, while lower grade bark is often sold to importers from Bangladesh, India, or China. The lowest quality 'cinnamon' is usually sold to China for additional processing. In Yên Bái Province, farmers commonly sell their stock to local intermediary traders based in their village or a nearby town, or sometimes to larger-scale traders who roam the province. These intermediaries then sell to larger-scale wholesalers, a few of whom are in the province, with others based in Hanoi or in Bắc Ninh Province, on the outskirts of Hanoi. Only small proportions of 'cinnamon', star anise and black cardamom are sold and consumed within the country, usually via wholesale markets in Hanoi, such as Đồng Xuân Market.

While the trade nodes at the start of these commodity chains within Vietnam and towards China are typically based on face-to-face and telephone connections, online advertisements of the spices become more important for those interested in selling further abroad. We turn to this online selling strategy now.

⁜ *Online Vietnamese retailer advertising approaches*

Websites have become important marketing tools for Vietnamese spice retailers and are therefore interesting places to start looking into how these retailers seek to promote their products. While some of the websites we visited looked rather outdated, merely providing basic information on the spice and the company, a few companies boasted more elaborate sites with media reports on the spices, recipes, and customer reviews. By rigorously analysing the content and images of these websites, it became clear which elements retailers at this node in the commodity chains considered important

Figure 7.1. Yao farmers sorting fresh black cardamom pods. **Colour** p. 223.

marketing points. These were not so much the origins of the spice itself, but were rather the hygiene practices and professional processing and trading capacities of the companies.

From our content analysis of marketing websites, we found that each of the ten websites for online Vietnamese wholesalers and retailers of black cardamom included images of raw black cardamom pods, while seven also included photos of what appeared to be processing or storage facilities. Rather strangely, one website had images that depicted hydroponic farms completely unrelated to cardamom commodity chains, which appeared to have been chosen rather at random. Four of the ten online wholesalers/retailers included a range of images of fresh cardamom, with a number of these images exhibiting cultivators either picking or sorting the fresh spice. One image showed women cultivators in obvious Yao ethnic minority clothing (Figure 7.1). Another retail site also featured images of lowland Kinh workers drying and sorting cardamom, with women donning conical hats, often associated with Kinh rice farmers. Half the websites had images of company employees, most frequently in processing facilities, seemingly inspecting or sorting through bulk quantities of the spice, with a few other individuals photographed in business attire. In general, the websites lacked imagination or 'advertising finesse' in the ways that they chose to portray black cardamom.

Nine of the ten online Vietnamese wholesalers/retailers for 'cinnamon' that we identified included images of raw 'cinnamon' bark being processed,

dried, or stored in large quantities. In fact, these were the most common scenes represented, with photos on these nine sites overwhelmingly depicting either a storage facility filled with unprocessed 'cinnamon', or workers in 'Western' clothing handling the spice. Six websites also displayed images of what appeared to be office workers, wearing suits or similar professional attire, posing in front of packaged spice at a processing facility, or in an office space. One website included an image of a small group of individuals, likely company employees, holding an award, while another showed employees giving the 'thumbs up' in front of their company logo. Another image presented two Vietnamese and European men shaking hands while smiling at the camera. Seven of the retailers included a number of images showing small quantities of 'cinnamon', either in stick form or in the form of powder. Only one website portrayed prepared food, although none of the featured meals obviously contained 'cinnamon'.

All but one of the ten Vietnamese websites selling star anise included close-up images of the raw spice, while the remaining retailer displayed packaged star anise. Four sites also showed fresh, unharvested star anise growing on trees, with one website including a video of a forest where, it is implied, star anise is harvested. This brief video was rather amateur, with the film uploaded at a 90-degree angle and with no voiceover or explanation. Company facilities were also frequently pictured, with over half the retailers displaying a number of photos of factories or warehouses where the spice was being dried, sorted, or stored in bulk quantities. Workers often appeared in these production photos wearing 'Western' style clothing, although they did not appear to be the focus of the photos; instead, the emphasis was placed on the companies' facilities. Only two star anise retailers offered an image of their office space or employees in professional attire, in contrast to 'cinnamon' retailer websites, which more commonly displayed such imagery.

From our horizontal comparison of the marketing approaches of Vietnam-based online spice wholesalers and retailers at this node of the spice commodity chains, we found little emphasis placed on either the specific locations where the spices were grown or on the cultivators of the spices, and even less emphasis on farmer livelihoods. Instead, quality control and the processing and storage facilities of the wholesalers took centre stage for all three spices, as well as the professionalism of company staff. There was no mention of geographical indications on any of these websites, an observation we return to later, although one retailer mentioned a 'certificate of origin', without any further elaboration. While many of the Vietnamese retailers listed various

international certifications to emphasise that their products meet global quality and safety standards, none made any mention of fair-trade certifications aimed at improving the lives of local spice cultivators and environments.

Take 3. Strategies of international wholesalers and retailers: Creating customer assumptions

Moving along the marketing nodes of the commodity chains, we analysed the websites of spice wholesalers and retailers in North America, Europe, and China. In contrast to the websites of Vietnamese-based spice wholesalers, the websites of North America- and Europe-based wholesalers and retailers tended to highlight specific features of these spices, including their places of origin and their cultivators, albeit sometimes in rather distorted ways.

⁜ *Analysis of black cardamom marketing websites*

All of the five North America-based websites that specifically advertised black cardamom from Vietnam included photos on their websites, with all the websites depicting photos of dried black cardamom pods. Three of the websites also displayed images of the spice on their company's packaging, while only one included photos of prepared food alongside their product. In these images, cardamom was advertised for its uses in hot pot cooking, barbequing, and *phở*. The images of prepared food included models posing as consumers, with one including a woman in chef's attire juggling a variety of ingredients in the air, with the caption 'Magic Seasoning of Master Chef', and another image comprising what appears to be family members cooking together around a stove with the caption 'Cardamom use in hotpot cooking. All nature – smoke dried'. On the same website, the only image showing ethnic minority cultivators (Figure 7.2) portrayed a small group of individuals posed in a forest, with the captions: 'Cardamom Forest in Lao Cai – Viet Nam', and 'Ms. Thanh Nguyen and two Hmong couples in Cardamom forest!' While the minority individuals wore clothes that they might wear to the fields on a regular day, the fifth person, who we assumed was Ms. Thanh Nguyen, wore an odd assortment of clothing from different minority groups, portraying a style that overseas buyers might thus erroneously assume as authentic.

Like the North American websites, all of the 10 European websites selling black cardamom displayed at least one image of the spice, with the majority

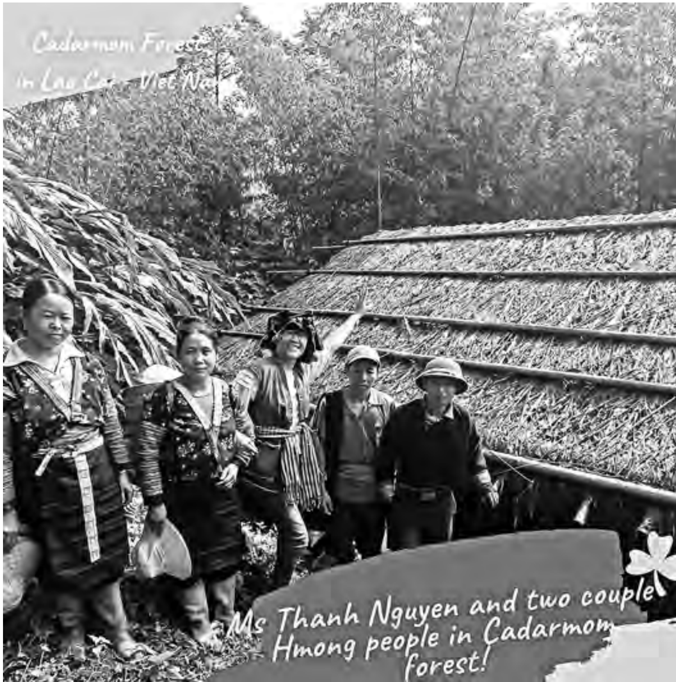

Figure 7.2. 'Hai Thien Vietnamese Black Smokey Dried Cardamom Pods'. **Colour** p. 223.

having photos of dried black cardamom pods. One of the ten European retailers also showed an image of fresh cardamom growing in the forest.

Three of the four Chinese retailing websites that claimed to sell Vietnam-sourced black cardamom included images of the spice, while one also presented images of the company itself: a large storage facility or warehouse, and a woman in a business suit sitting at a computer in front of the company's sign. The fourth retailer, who advertised their product as black cardamom, misleadingly had images of green cardamom, along with photos of factory workers who did not appear to be processing cardamom, or any spice for that matter.

Comparing all the websites for Vietnam-sourced black cardamom, we found that all the online Chinese and Vietnamese websites appeared to sell wholesale and to export large quantities of black cardamom, with prices listed per kilogramme or tonne. Most of the European and North American websites, on the other hand, focused on retailing to local consumer markets, selling black cardamom in packages ranging from 25 to 500 grams. The prod-

uct descriptions on the Chinese and Vietnamese websites often emphasised food quality and safety, listing various certifications as a testament to the quality of their product. All the North American websites instead noted the 'all natural' growing or drying processes for their black cardamom. Fairly similar to what we found for the Vietnam-based websites, those based in China focused almost exclusively on the technical specificities of the spice, with only one-quarter of the sites mentioning culinary uses. Approximately 60 per cent of both European and North American retailers included information regarding the culinary uses of the spice, with the remaining retailers focused on medicinal uses. While 80 per cent of the Vietnamese retailers listed the specific province of origin, only two-fifths from North America, and one-quarter from China did so. None of the websites from Europe-based companies mentioned a specific province, likely reflecting the fact that the livelihoods or other characteristics of the cultivators held little interest for European wholesalers when marketing their spices online.

⁜ *Analysis of 'cinnamon' marketing websites*

Each of the ten North America-based websites selling Vietnam-sourced 'cinnamon' included one or more images of raw 'cinnamon', either in the form of 'cinnamon' sticks or as powder. Four of the ten North American online sites listed their product as organic, although only one site included a certification logo to support their claim. Contrary to what we found on North American websites for black cardamom, not a single person was depicted in any of the photos. Only two websites showed images other than the spice itself, and in both cases these images showcased lush, green forests. We were left to assume that these forests were in Vietnam, as location-specific details were not provided. One retailer, also noted in Chapter 4, included a video with the CEO of the company walking through a rural area in northern Vietnam, describing how their company provided school supplies in the area as a social project that 'really need[ed] to get done'. In the video, this social initiative was put forth as a 'sustainable' way for the company to give back to the local communities from whom they sourced their 'cinnamon'.

As was the case with North America-based online retailers, all ten Europe-based websites included at least one image of 'cinnamon', either as sticks or as powder. Two retailers also presented images of food cooked with the spice, namely an apple pie and a warm beverage with 'cinnamon' sprinkled on top – both reminiscent of food consumed during winter

holidays in Europe. One French retailer, Marie-Line House, displayed a series of images showcasing Yao minority women harvesting, carrying, and sorting through 'cinnamon' tree bark. These photos appeared completely staged, with the women dressed in traditional Yao clothing, all perfectly posed and styled with smiles directed at the camera (Figure 7.3.).[3] From Turner, Derks, and Ngô's research in the region with 'cinnamon' cultivators (see Chapter 4), it is clear that Yao farmers never go to their fields in their finest clothes, unless they are going for shamanic rituals or for a burial. This choice of images was notably different from those of cultivators and workers found on Vietnamese and Chinese websites selling 'cinnamon'. The latter tended to portray workers in 'Western-style' clothing in more administrative settings, in addition to a few images with manual workers wearing company work clothes and lowland Vietnamese conical-style hats. Intriguingly, the French-based retailer Marie-Line House (with the contrived photos noted above) mentioned that their 'cinnamon' boasted an '*Indication géographique*' and that the spice was from Yên Bái Province – the only time that we found a GI noted on a website for any of the three spices.[4] However, the same website then added that this was 'la Cannelle de Saïgon', a cinnamon category that does not actually exist, as detailed in Chapter 4 of this collection.

Half of the ten China-based websites that we found selling 'Vietnamese cinnamon' included images of the spice in small quantities, either as sticks or as packaged powder. Eight also displayed a number of images of the spice at various processing stages, with the majority of these images showing large quantities of 'cinnamon' being dried, sorted, or stored at what appeared to be factories or storage facilities. Workers or cultivators were highlighted in images on three websites, with most of these featuring labourers in processing plants. All these workers were dressed in 'Western-style' clothing, but generally wore conical hats as well. One retailer included a collage of photos displaying a lavish office building, a row of cubicles, and a group of office workers in a conference room dressed in formal, professional attire. Nonetheless, these pictures had no features that marked them as being in a specific place or linked to a particular retailer or wholesaler.

3 A nearly identical staged picture with the same women appeared in an online article of Voice of Vietnam in 2016 about 'cinnamon' cultivation reducing poverty in Yên Bái Province (Thua Xuan, 2016). The recurring use of such images reveals that very particular images of 'cinnamon' cultivation are currently in circulation, with very similar discourses attached to them

4 www.amazon.fr/Cannelle-Sa%C3%AFgon-B%C3%A2tons-10cm-Vietnam/dp/B085C5J33Z.

Figure 7.3. A staged image of Yao women wearing their finest traditional clothing and carrying 'cinnamon' bark in a highly unlikely procession. **Colour** p. 224.

Comparing all the 'cinnamon' websites that we analysed, the North America-based websites tended to focus to a greater degree on retail rather than wholesale. These sites also provided potential customers with the history of the spice and its sustainable nature more frequently than Europe-, China-, or Vietnam-based websites. Some of these North American websites were rather romanticised, with histories focused on specific events. One such site elaborated: 'This spice was used as part of funeral rites in ancient Rome as well, including the funeral of Emperor Nero's wife in 65 AD. He is said to have burned a supply of cinnamon that would have lasted Rome an entire year when she was being buried' (Spices Inc., n.d.). Nonetheless, this same website provided a clear distinction between cinnamon and *C. cassia*, a distinction many others did not address. Many North American websites also emphasised the sustainable nature of plantation management. A few North American websites took what we call a 'casual millennial' approach to advertising. These sites included comments such as: 'The silverback gorilla of the cinnamon world, all the younger cinnamons know to stay out of the way'; 'Vietnamese cinnamon is the butt-kicker cinnamon of the cooking world'; 'We also like a pinch added to a batch of ready coffee grounds or espresso powder… to give the everyday cup a bit of pep' (Beanilla, n.d.); or 'It really is a must-try. Once you taste this stuff, nothing else compares…' (Silk Road Spice Merchant, n.d.). Such commentaries revealed little about

the lives and livelihoods of 'cinnamon' cultivators, focusing exclusively on the consumption angle of the spice. Several European retailers also framed cinnamon as a 'weight loss supplement' and 'superfood', and one website even touted that 'a little cinnamon in the coffee can be the difference between losing weight or not at all' (Allt-fraktfritt.se, n.d.). Although the medicinal qualities of the spice were mentioned on Chinese and Vietnamese sites, with one Vietnamese site even framing the spice as an 'indispensable' and 'precious' medicine, this specific 'weight loss' angle was only advanced by European retailers.

⁜ *Analysis of star anise marketing websites*

The majority of North American websites displayed star anise in its raw form, with just over half presenting the spice against a simple white background. Only one North American retailer included images of the spice arranged in dishes, showing the raw or ground spice as it overflowed from an engraved dish onto an embroidered tablecloth. One retailer featured an image of fresh star anise growing on a tree, with the same site also including a botanical drawing of the plant in a separate image. Only one North American retailer showcased the culinary uses of the spice, exhibiting a photo of mulled wine, again focusing on a common beverage enjoyed in Europe and North America during the holiday season.

Like the North American websites, half of the European retailers we found selling Vietnam-sourced star anise added at least one image of the packaged spice, either in raw or ground form. Whole dried fruit were commonly pictured, presented either on a white background, in a serving bowl, or perched on a wooden spoon. One European website featured an image of fresh, unharvested star anise growing on a tree, and another included an unaffiliated video that gave instructions on how to make star anise tea. Only one retailer, the French company 'David Vanille, Épices d'Exception' displayed an image with people. This photo – arranged to look like a postcard – portrayed a young Hmong girl in traditional clothing waving at the camera in front of a lush landscape comprising rice paddies and swidden agriculture (Figure 7.4). Given that star anise trees were absent in the image and that Hmong are not the main cultivators of star anise, one wonders why the retailer chose this picture to promote star anise.

Seven of the ten Chinese websites that sold Vietnamese star anise had at least one image of the raw spice presented in small quantities, either on

Figure 7.4. Imagery used to sell star anise online, with an unlikely cultivator. **Colour** p. 224.

a white background or served in a bowl. These photos emphasised the individual fruit, although images depicting larger quantities of star anise were also frequently featured, with half of the Chinese websites showing bulk quantities stored in cardboard boxes. Three websites included images of processing facilities, with two companies presenting a series of photos showing uniformed factory employees either drying and sorting the spice, or simply smiling in front of the company's facilities. Two of the Chinese websites contained images of both office workers in professional attire and what appeared to be laboratories. Both of these sites emphasised the pharmaceutical and medicinal benefits of star anise, and marketed the spice as an herbal or medicinal product rather than a culinary one. One company that appeared to sell star anise predominantly to the pharmaceutical industry also inserted an image of five European individuals dressed as doctors, smiling at the camera and giving the 'thumbs up'.

When comparing all the star anise websites we analysed, the majority of the Chinese star anise websites appeared to be marketing products to international wholesale buyers, seemingly in the pharmaceutical industry. These websites frequently mentioned shikimic acid, a chemical substance extracted from star anise and a key ingredient in the Tamiflu drug (see Chapter 2). Almost all the Chinese and Vietnamese websites emphasised the medicinal and pharmaceutical uses of the spice, citing various health benefits

ranging from suppressing coughs to curing cancer. Many of the companies from these two countries highlighted the longstanding satisfaction of global customers as a testament to the quality of their product, often including a long list of countries where they had done business.

Almost all the European websites simply stated their star anise's place of origin as 'Vietnam', with the exception of one website that vaguely listed the origin of the spice they sold as 'Vietnam, China'. Three North American websites clearly listed a place of origin for their star anise, and two Chinese websites mentioned the province in which their product was grown. The remaining eight Chinese and seven North American websites simply identified the origin as Vietnam, or advertised the spice as Vietnamese. Four of the North American companies underscored the traditional uses of star anise in Chinese medicine, but the spice's culinary uses nonetheless took centre stage for most North American retailers compared to those from other regions. One North American retailer even blended the medicinal and culinary benefits by describing the spice as 'an intoxicating scent – induces hunger in the kitchen and lust in the bedroom' (Beanilla, n.d.).

North American and European websites appeared to be more concerned with providing the consumer with at least some information regarding the history and cultivation of the spice than Chinese and Vietnamese websites. However, this information often focused on growing techniques – such as when the spice was harvested, how it was dried, and so forth – rather than on the people who cultivated it. One European retailer did describe a local custom in Lạng Sơn Province, noting that 'it is customary… to plant a [star anise] tree at the birth of a child. 15 years later, the star anise harvested will be used to finance that child's education' (Vanille, n.d.). Although it is questionable whether this is a widespread custom, this feel-good story attempted to connect the global consumer to the local producer, albeit in a romanticised and exaggerated way.

RESILIENT FARMERS AND CONFUSED DE-COMMODIFICATION

> As consumer culture adds additional layers of meaning to commodities and the physical distance between production and consumption is increased, the veil that shrouds both social and environmental conditions has become all the more impenetrable (Hudson and Hudson, 2003: 427).

Broadly speaking, the analysis made here reveals that many Vietnam- and China-based wholesalers and retailers advertising online are dedicated to shifting large quantities of the spices in wholesale transactions. This contrasts with their North American and European counterparts, who tend to place greater emphasis on appealing to small-scale retail outlets or individual customers. Vietnam- and China-based websites thus focus far more on business professionalism and practical matters such as wholesale spice storage facilities, factory resources, available quantities, quality assurance, and packaging options. This also corresponds with key informant interviewee explanations of the approaches taken at international trade fairs, where Vietnam- and China-based wholesalers negotiate with traders from around the world, and discussions focus on concerns over quality control, quantities, and guarantees of steady supplies (Interview, 2019). Further along the global commodity chains, the marketing strategies of many North American and European retailing sites oftentimes instrumentalise exoticised images of ethnic minority cultivators instead.

Our findings reveal a rather intriguing cycle of de-commodification – commodification – de-commodification – that is underway along these spice commodity chains. First, the Vietnamese government is promoting geographic indication labels for 'cinnamon' and star anise, which could indicate attempts to de-commodify these products through connecting them to specific places and geographies (see Cook and Crang, 1996; Bidwell et al., 2018b). Second, the Vietnam and China-based wholesalers analysed above achieve the opposite, commonly stripping the crops of links to specific places of cultivation. Adopting a far more functional approach to their deliverables, these actors emphasise their own capacity to serve global markets rather than the specificities of the spices themselves. The spices thus become 'placeless' commodities, viewed chiefly for their exchange value (Appadurai, 2013). Third, US- and Europe-based retailers promote new de-commodification approaches, linking the spices to their 'exotic' ethnic minority growers. These individuals are nonetheless objectified – portrayed as permanently smiling and wearing traditional clothes. In short, such imaginaries have little in common with the realities of farmers, their livelihoods, and their broader agrarian concerns. These imaginaries also obscure the actual social and cultural relations and other realities through which these commodities come to be (Gunderson, 2014). The irony is that through depicting ethnic minorities as such, Western actors serve to perpetrate and reinforce the same

biases and stereotypes that are commonly emphasised in Vietnamese state propaganda regarding upland ethnic minority communities. This 'selective cultural preservation' (Koh, 2004) stresses the exotic, colourful, and benign demonstrations of material culture, including clothes, music, and dances, as these are deemed worthy of attention and support (Michaud and Turner, 2006). However, the question remains – who stands to benefit from these different approaches?

Of the 109 websites analysed through our sampling approach outlined above, only once was a GI of an individual spice briefly mentioned. A specific search for the mention of GIs on *any* Vietnam-sourced spice websites found only one additional website.[5] Thus, if GIs are so rarely utilised by private Vietnam-based exporters or by wholesalers and retailers based in China, Europe, or North America, perhaps it is local officials and outside NGOs that stand to gain the most from this strategy? While this is speculation of course, we return to the quote in Chapter 4, when a foreign spice trader gives his candid opinion of the GI scheme for 'cinnamon' in Yên Bái Province. He is very frank in noting that the GI has not helped local communities to date and that funds have been skimmed off for other purposes. While his reflection is rather sceptical, and there are no doubt positive aspects of the GIs too, it has been challenging to ascertain how the GIs are being utilised in the marketing of these spices beyond state-sponsored billboards and lavish local trade fairs. These may attract local buyers, but given that the Vietnamese market remains comparatively small, the overall benefits of this approach appear rather limited. This suggests that the Vietnamese state's GI strategy is unlikely to help local spice cultivators significantly in the long-term, and is somewhat redundant given the disconnect with final – *international* – nodes of these commodity chains.

One could reason therefore, that if there is a genuine willingness to support local cultivators of these spices in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, NGOs, social enterprises, or local government officials could work with ethically motivated retailers to create websites that dig deeper into providing accurate information regarding the livelihoods and everyday experiences of upland cultivators. Such details might add to the non-financial factors that customers weigh up when buying spice products. This would converge with

5 www.vinasamex.com/en/news/vina-samex-raising-the-level-of-cinnamon-and-star-anise-of-vietnam.

the second interpretation of de-commodification that we outlined earlier, namely that de-commodification makes price less central to the value that people allocate to products (Bidwell et al., 2018a). Nonetheless, authors such as Gunderson (2014) would critique such a stance, drawing from the initial interpretation of de-commodification also outlined above, which has closer conceptual links to Marxist analysis and the hidden geographies of food it reveals. These authors have noted that such approaches to encourage de-commodification through 'ethical consumerism' have merely tried to convince concerned consumers that they can buy a commodity and somehow the problems linked with capitalism will diminish. The same reasoning suggests that simply providing more accurate website information allows companies and consumers to ignore the more structurally rooted problems that capitalist relations create in agrarian settings and global commodity chains (see Fridell, 2007; Alkon and McCullen, 2011).

At the end of the day, the ethnic minority farmers cultivating these spices in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands are well aware that the Vietnamese state is not about to rework lowland–upland socio-economic or political relations in any meaningful way. Moreover, the power relations embedded in these spice crop commodity chains will not invert any time soon, unless culturally sensitive retailers and customers become far more active and engaged than they are currently, as our analysis of 109 spice retail websites has shown. Thus, these farmers will – once again – need to remain resilient, as has been underscored in other chapters of this book, by building on their own traditional ecological knowledge, modes of local knowledge exchange, and through the creation of agro-ecologically sound livelihood diversification approaches.

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