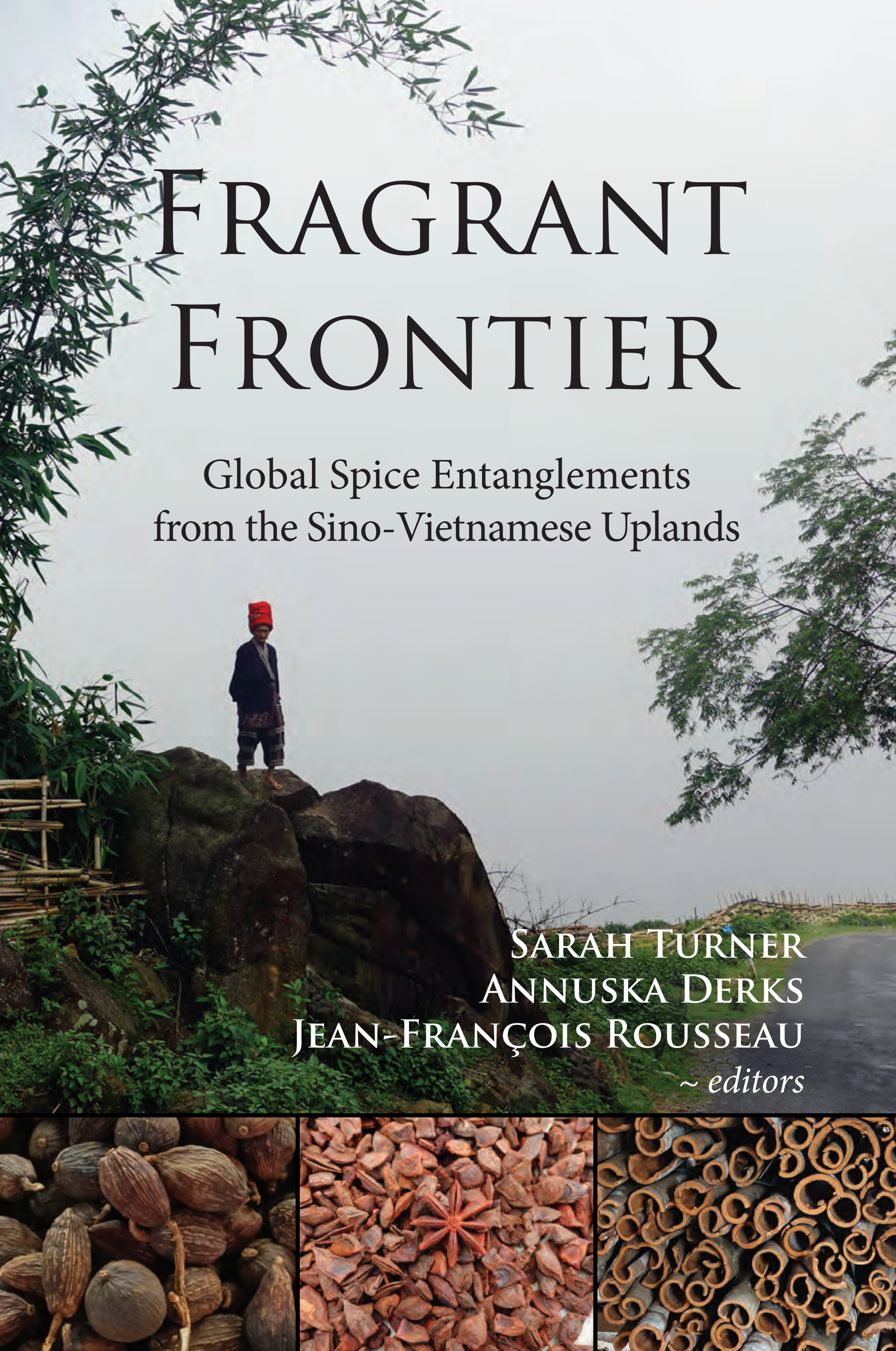
Fragrant Frontier

Global Spice Entanglements from the Sino-Vietnamese Uplands



Sarah Turner
Annuska Derks
Jean-François Rousseau
~ *editors*

CHAPTER 4

The taste of cinnamon

Making a specialty product in northern Vietnam

Annuska Derks, Sarah Turner, and Ngô Thúy Hạnh

INTRODUCTION

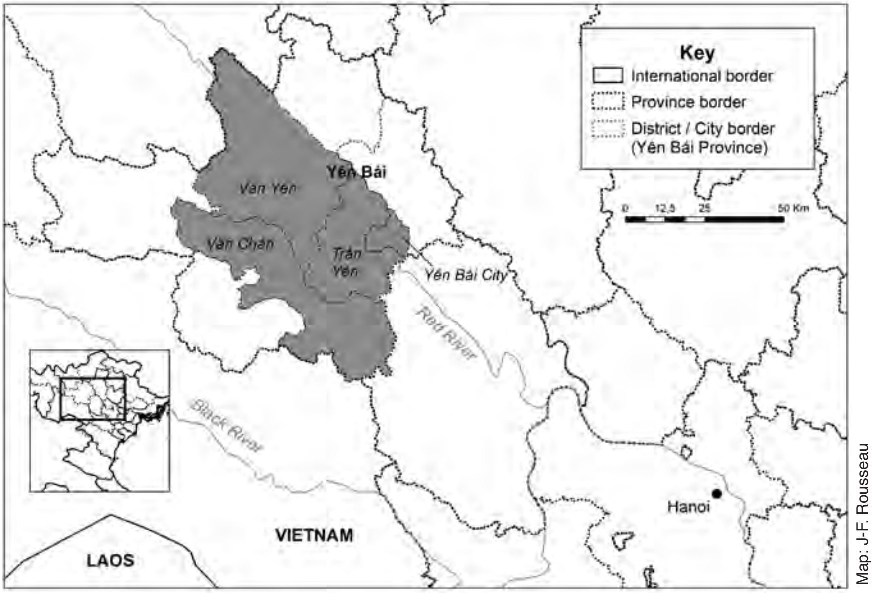
'Cinnamon is the taste of globalisation', writes Crowther (2018: 67). Its lightweight and compact properties make it a perfect global commodity, connecting distant producers with consumers across the world (ibid.). The spicy-sweet flavour of cinnamon is a prominent ingredient in both sweet and savoury dishes, and its reputed medicinal and antioxidant properties make it a valued component in pharmaceutical and beauty products (Wang et al., 2009). The use and trade of cinnamon go back to antiquity, when it was a treasured spice, with its trade expanding during colonial times, as noted in Chapter 1. Now cinnamon has become part of an agro-food complex geared towards 'producing more at cheaper prices', and between 1970 and 2018 the global production of cinnamon multiplied more than tenfold (Augustin-Jean, 2012: 1; Piyasiri and Wijeratne, 2016; FAO, n.d.).

The proliferation of agro-food production and the globalisation of agro-food markets have contributed to an intensification of interconnections across the globe. At the same time, consumers in the Global North are becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about the circumstances of agro-food product cultivation in the Global South. Geographical indications, along with organic and fair-trade certifications, have multiplied in response to consumer desires for high-quality products that are perceived to be environmentally friendly and socially responsible (Goodman, 2004; Taylor, 2005; Lyon, 2006; Elias and Saussey, 2013). However, given the complex nature of agro-food commodity chains, distinguishing between products of different value categories is not a straightforward process (West, 2010; le Polain de Waroux and Lambin, 2013). The questions of why products get categorised in specific ways, who chooses such labels, and how these decisions impact livelihoods in the Global South require an analysis of the interactions within and among commodity chain actors and nodes.

In this chapter, we explore the contested ways by which 'Vietnamese cinnamon' is categorised and how value is created along its commodity chains, focusing on the spice that originates from the country's northern uplands. We trace the routes by which this 'cinnamon' (*quế* in Vietnamese) moves from cultivators in the hills of Vietnam to consumers in the Global North, investigating the actors involved in its production, processing, transport, marketing, and retail. Along the way, we aim to uncover the often contradictory ways in which different actors define 'Vietnamese cinnamon' and endow it with value. We pay particular attention to how these processes affect ethnic minority farmers in upland Vietnam, a region where previous scholarship has documented increasing global market integration of agro-food commodities including coffee, cassava, and black cardamom (Grant, 2014; Turner et al., 2015; To et al., 2016).

As became clear during the course of our research, cinnamon is a particularly difficult agro-food commodity to define and qualify, despite its long history and its ubiquity as a global commodity. It turns out that much of what is sold in supermarkets around the world as cinnamon is what some refer to as 'bastard cinnamon', or rather, varieties of cassia (Chennault, 2006: 156; see also Senanyake and Wijsekera, 2004; Haw, 2017). But even cassia is 'not just cassia', our informants insisted. While controversy surrounds the categorisation of the species grown in Vietnam's northern uplands, actors ranging from cultivators, state agencies, and development organisations to overseas retailers insist that particular (often conflicting) properties set apart the Vietnam-sourced spice as a high-quality 'cinnamon'.

Drawing on scholarship regarding tropical commodity chains and anthropological debates over the creation of value and quality, in this chapter we analyse the routes and controversies of 'Vietnamese cinnamon'. Through ethnographic fieldwork and an in-depth content analysis, we first attempt to decipher the taxonomies of 'cinnamon' – somewhat of a tall order given the contradictions we find both within the scientific literature and among our informants. We then trace this spice as it works its way from Yên Bái Province – Vietnam's top 'cinnamon' producing province – to consumers across the world. Along the way, we focus on how actors at different nodes along these commodity chains generate and enhance value through naming and



Map 4.1. Yên Bái Province, Vietnam, with key 'cinnamon' cultivation districts.

marketing practices. We also show how the 'cinnamon' commodity chains originating in upland Vietnam are built on asymmetric power relations vis-à-vis ethnicity, gender, and politics, and how value – far from being simply an inherent property of the spice – emerges from portrayals of its authenticity, of the exoticised cultivators of the spice, and of social responsibility (cf. West, 2010; 2012, regarding specialty coffee).

We completed ethnographic fieldwork at multiple sites throughout Yên Bái Province, Vietnam from 2014 to 2018. In the province's three top cultivation districts of Trấn Yên, Văn Chấn, and Văn Yên (see Map 4.1.), we conducted interviews with 32 individuals involved in 'cinnamon' cultivation, oil distillation, and wholesaling, as well as with five officials from local People's Committees, a land registry department, and the provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. In Hanoi, we completed conversational interviews with 35 wholesale and neighbourhood market stall vendors, and 35 consumers. Further research was conducted via online or in-person interviews with two agriculture researchers in Hanoi, an NGO expert in spice commodity chains, a botanist, and a spice export company manager from 2014 to 2021. In addition, we undertook a survey of 48 online retailers claiming to sell Vietnam-sourced 'cinnamon' – 18 in the US, 15 in China, ten in Europe, and five in Canada.[1] At other end points of the commodity chain, including other Asian locales (Beijing, Shanghai, Bangkok, Hong Kong) and global cities farther afield (Auckland, Montreal, New York, Zurich), we conducted 23 conversational interviews with 'cinnamon' retailers.

VALUE CREATION ALONG COMMODITY CHAINS

The argument that commodity chains are built on unequal power relations is nothing new. Classical commodity chain studies that trace a good from its start to end nodes have revealed the inequalities in the types of labour expended and profits reaped by different actors along these chains (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Bair, 2009; Bowen, 2010). That is also why commodity chain frameworks have appealed to researchers with an interest in battling inequalities and supporting the position of less economically powerful countries, communities, or individual actors (Forster, 2006; Neimark et al., 2016).

However, frameworks such as global commodity chains (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994) and global value chains (Gereffi et al., 2005) have also been criticised for their linear, deterministic interpretations (Forster, 2006; Bair, 2009); for obscuring the ways in which actors' values and interpretations may diverge at different nodes along the chains (Long and Villarreal, 1998; Hughes, 2001); and for disregarding the interplay of factors like gender, ethnicity, and class influencing social relations between actors (Leslie and Reimer, 1999). In response to these critiques, a 'systems of provision' approach has sought to illuminate the connections between economic actors by concentrating on the material and cultural practices that govern the creation, distribution, and consumption of commodities (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Narotzky, 2005). This framework focuses on how goods like agro-food products move through space, how the actors involved assume their roles and power relations, and how the livelihood trajectories of cultivators at initial stages of commodity chains can be affected by socio-economic and political forces (Leslie and Reimer, 1999; Hughes, 2001; Bush, 2004).

This 'systems of provision' approach is particularly relevant for case studies of tropical agro-commodity chains that seek to reveal historical and

1 These were completed in 2017, three years earlier than the searches for Chapter 7. Different online sites were the most active at the two different times, however the advertising approaches were very similar across both time periods.

ongoing structural inequalities. These studies typically involve the flow of goods from the Global South to the Global North, as crops uniquely adapted to specific ecological niches are exploited and processed in systems that often have colonial roots. This flow of goods is not only determined by interactions among producers, traders, and consumers, but also by actors such as state officials and NGOs who influence governance regimes (Gibbon, 2001; Talbot, 2002; 2009).

In such a context, it is particularly important to pay attention to what Callon et al. (2002) call the 'economy of qualities', or the ways by which different actors qualify goods, assigning value to them in relation to other goods. Forster (2006: 290) explains this as 'the construction of qualitative value – value produced in a system of differences'. In addition, commodities can be seen as having 'careers' (Appadurai, 1986), such that yesterday's 'bastard spice' may be today's high-value export. A commodity's value thus emerges through its movement as well as through the social relations, material networks, and ideological connections between producers and consumers (Forster, 2006). This commodity value is therefore defined not only in Marxist economic and labour terms but also through the existence of 'meaningful difference' within some greater system of categories (Graeber, 2001). For example, actors along a commodity chain, from producers to trade managers, retailers, and consumers, are constantly creating and negotiating qualitative standards, tastes, preferences, and images of authenticity (Forster, 2006). Commodities can be sorted into value classes that cater to different markets, creating a 'proliferation of niches' based on diversity (Tsing, 2013: 35). Though factors such as culture, gender, ethnicity, and geographic origin tend to be 'banished from the economic', the profitability of niches in global commodity chains may rely on marketing these very aspects of their production (ibid.: 158).

Ethical agro-food networks, such as registration systems for fair-trade and organic goods, provide relevant examples of how value can be created through such categorisations (Bidwell et al., 2018a). Rather than participating as usual in a market of undifferentiated goods with competition based on price, the products in these ethical agro-food networks are 'de-commodified'. This may entail supplying consumers with information about producers or the ecological features of a good, which are purportedly outside the realm of the economic, but nevertheless serves to add value by differentiating the good on the basis of quality and identity (ibid.). Hence, 'de-commodification' should not be understood as a process by which products fully move out of their usual commodity sphere (Kopytoff, 1986), but rather as a process that involves the conscious use of non-economic factors to enhance value. One goal of de-commodifying a good – setting it apart in terms of quality, identity, or geography to add value – is to shield producers from price volatility (ibid.). In our case study of 'Vietnamese cinnamon', we document strategies of de-commodification that are often inconsistent and even contradictory – and that in the end fail to benefit actors at the starting nodes of commodity chains like farmers and local traders.

TENUOUS TAXONOMIES

> It would not be an exaggeration to say that the cinnamon from Yên Bái Province is coveted. Known as the 'champagne of cinnamon', it contains a high level of essential oils, giving it a more intense flavor (Sahale Snacks, n.d.).

Among some experts, 'Vietnamese cinnamon' has a positive reputation for its particularly strong, spicy, and bittersweet flavour (Madan and Kannan, 2004). Indeed, in the quote above, the US-based nut and dried fruit company Sahale Snacks praises cinnamon from Yên Bái Province for its unique qualities. The question, however, is whether this is just advertising, or if it actually reflects inherent quality differences between 'Vietnamese cinnamon' and other varieties.

Both cinnamon and cassia varieties originate from the dried bark of evergreen trees of the family *Lauraceae,* genus *Cinnamomum,* whose native range stretches across tropical continental Asia and insular Southeast Asia (de Guzman and Siemonsma, 1999; Weiss, 1997). Among the 150 to 250 species classified within the genus *Cinnamomum,* only a few are utilised commercially. According to International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) criteria, Ceylon cinnamon, or 'true cinnamon' (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum Blume*; ISO 6539), also known as *Cinnamomum verum,* should be distinguished from three other species, whose common names confusingly include cassia (ISO 6538). These three species are: Chinese cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia* (Nees) ex Blume); Indonesian cassia (*Cinnamomum burmanni* C.G. Nees); and Vietnamese cassia (*Cinnamomum loureirii* Nees) (Statista, 2018; Workman, n.d.).[2]

2 In this chapter, when we refer to cassia (no italics), we are referring to the common name that has been given to cluster together Chinese cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia* (Nees) ex Blume),

These different species of *Cinnamomum* are considered to be of different qualities that correspondingly demand different prices. The bark and oil of Ceylon cinnamon is considered to be the highest quality, especially when sourced from Sri Lanka (Senanayake and Wijesekera, 2004; CBI, 2018; Piyasiri and Wijeratne, 2016). This species is the most widely available to consumers in Europe and Latin America and can demand a value of up to ten times that of the three common cassia varieties. US and Canadian consumers, on the other hand, usually find one of the cheaper cassia varieties on their shelves (Feldman and Bauer, 2008).

Compared to the various types of cassia, Ceylon cinnamon has a lighter colour and a milder, sweeter taste, while cassia is stronger and spicier. Ceylon cinnamon sticks consist of several thin layers of dried bark, while cassia sticks comprise one thick layer of rolled bark. These distinctions are linked to differences in chemical composition, with Ceylon cinnamon boasting a wider range of aromatic compounds and less coumarin (an aromatic organic chemical compound) (ISO, 1997; Senanayake and Wijesekera, 2004; Wang et al., 2013). Due to the fact that coumarin is now recognised as potentially hazardous in high quantities, the value of cassia has fallen even further.[3]

Nonetheless, several actors in the spice trade contest these supposed quality differences. For instance, the Canada-based South China Seas Trading Company (n.d.) praises fine and fragrant 'Saigon cinnamon' and argues that conceptions of Ceylon cinnamon as superior to cassia varieties are 'more about colonial politics than quality'. Moreover, since cinnamon and cassia varieties are mostly consumed in powder form, the subtle differences easily get lost. Naming practices do not help matters either. In the US, both cinnamon and these different cassia can officially be referred to as cinnamon, and the same is true for the common designations used in European languages, which are derived from the root words of cinnamon, such as *canela/kaneel* or *cimet/Zimt* (Ravindran and Nirmal Babu, 2004; Feldman and Bauer, 2008). Hence, most consumers in the Global North

Indonesian cassia (*Cinnamomum burmanni* C.G. Nees); and Vietnamese cassia (*Cinnamomum loureirii* Nees). When we refer to *C. cassia* (italicised), we are talking about that specific species.

3 EU regulations, for instance, have set limits on coumarin in ready-to-eat foods, and endorse Ceylon cinnamon over cassia varieties (European Union, 2006; Bundesamt für Risikobewertung, 2012). The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) also officially distinguishes between Ceylon cinnamon and cassia varieties on the basis of coumarin levels (FSSAI, 2017).

remain unaware of the finer distinctions between *Cinnamomum verum*, and the three most commonly recognised varieties of cassia.

Adding to the confusion, global trade statistics count *Cinnamomum verum* and the cassia varieties together. This resulted in Sri Lanka, still the chief producer of Ceylon cinnamon, seeing its global share of production fall in the early 1980s with the expansion of the cultivation of cassia varieties by Indonesia and China. After Vietnam entered the global market in the wake of the Đổi Mới economic reforms in the mid-1980s, the country's 'cinnamon' cultivation skyrocketed (Madan and Kannan, 2004). Vietnam's production increased from 3,200 to over 35,000 metric tonnes from 1990 to 2016, making Vietnam the world's third largest exporter in global statistics after Indonesia and China, with 15 per cent of global cinnamon/cassia exports (Piyasiri and Wijeratne, 2016; FAO, n.d.).

While Vietnam has thus become a major player in the global cinnamon/cassia trade, there exists considerable confusion about what is actually grown in the country. The spice from Vietnam is known by many names, including Vietnamese, Saigon, Annam, or Tonkin cassia, as well as *Cannelle de Saïgon* or Saigon cinnamon (Weiss, 1997). The ISO (1997) recognises Vietnamese cassia (or *Cinnamomum loureirii* Nees)[4] as a distinct variety, and bases this classification on the higher concentration of volatile oils in comparison to Chinese or Indonesian cassia. However, botanists are increasingly uncertain as to whether *C. loureirii* is actually a separate species from *C. cassia* (also known as Chinese cassia). Ito et al. (2004) have surveyed cassia varieties within Vietnam and have reported significant differences in oil content and taste between trees located in the central and northern parts of the country. While the authors suggest that these could comprise different species, with *C. loureirii* in central Vietnam and *C. cassia* in northern Vietnam, they note that more taxonomic tests are necessary to determine whether the species' origins are really different. Yet, as the lead author of that article, Michiho Ito, has suggested in private correspondence, even with further tests it might not be possible to clearly determine whether a species distinction exists, since the chemical properties of cassia varieties can vary based on many factors, including climatic and soil differences.

4 The botanical name of Vietnamese cassia recalls João de Loureiro, the Portuguese Jesuit missionary and botanist who first described the species during an 18th century voyage to Cochinchina (today's southern Vietnam) (Weiss, 1997; Nguyen, 2004).

Other scholars seem to doubt whether *C. loureirii* exists at all. Leela (2008) does not mention the variety in his chemical analysis of cinnamon and cassia, but states that Chinese cassia comes from both China and Vietnam. Ravindran and Nirmal Babu (2004) report that the native range of Chinese cassia extends to both China and Vietnam, while asserting that, although *C. loureirii* exists, it is so rare that it 'cannot be the source of Vietnam cassia' (ibid.: 10). Nguyen (2004: 158) also states that Vietnamese cassia is not *C. loureirii,* detailing that 'based on 20 years of study on collection and classification of specimens of *Cinnamonum* from the north to the south of Vietnam, we reached the conclusion that Vietnamese cassia is nothing but *C. cassia*' or Chinese cassia. 'Vietnamese cassia' and 'Saigon cassia' are thus, he argues, labels introduced by the government, and are not grounded in regional differentiation according to botanical criteria or grade quality.[5]

This taxonomic inquiry casts doubt on how unique Vietnamese cassia truly is. Though retailers exalt Vietnamese cassia as the world's best and the ISO categorises *C. loureirii* as a distinct species, the academic literature challenges these assumptions. While leaving us in a state of mild confusion, this leads us to our next step – heading to plantations in northern Vietnam to ask: how do local farmers and traders categorise the spice they grow and sell, and why? And how do these categorisations relate to how value is assigned to this spice?

VIETNAM'S KEY 'CINNAMON' COMMODITY CHAINS

'Cinnamon' production in Vietnam is principally located in the northern provinces of Yên Bái and Thanh Hóa and in Quảng Nam Province in central Vietnam. Yên Bái Province, our study site in the northern uplands, produces by far the most 'cinnamon' in the country, with cultivation concentrated in the districts of Trấn Yên, Văn Chấn, and Văn Yên (see Map 4.1.; Ngoc Thao, 2014). The cultivation of 'cinnamon' in Yên Bái stretches back hundreds of years. The spice was offered as tribute to imperial Chinese feudal overlords, and then during French colonial rule (1887–1954) it was valued as an export

5 The designation 'Saigon cinnamon' is particularly ironic, because no cassia varieties are grown in or around Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). One official whom we interviewed mused that the name 'Saigon cinnamon' might be derived from the city's status as an important port and that perhaps exporters hence labelled the spice 'Saigon cinnamon' because it came through Saigon, regardless of where it was grown.

crop (Gouvernement Général de l'Indo-Chine, 1901; Miller, 1947; Nguyen, 2004). After Vietnam gained independence and entered the subsidy era (*thời bao cấp*), only forestry officials were allowed to cultivate and trade 'cinnamon'. One ethnic minority Yao (Dao) farmer recalled: 'Only foresters had the right to grow or transfer [use-rights of] cinnamon trees because cinnamon cultivation was illegal, like opium is now'.[6] This changed after Vietnam's Đổi Mới economic reforms from the mid-1980s, and in particular with the 1991 Law on Forest Protection and Development and the revised Land Law of 1993 that granted usage rights. Fifty-year land-use certificates, commonly known as Red Books, provided limited rights over certain plots of forest to individuals or groups of households, meaning that cultivators were able to increase their 'cinnamon' production (Pettenella, 2001).

The expansion of 'cinnamon' cultivation that then occurred was not only related to land access and market opportunities, but was also due to a shift in the Vietnamese government's forestry priorities from exploitation to restoration in the 1990s. State programmes that aimed to reforest 'bare hills', combat swidden agriculture, and reduce poverty involved subsidising tree seedlings and compensating households that planted trees (McElwee, 2016). Many Yên Bái Province farmers reported that they began growing 'cinnamon' on their hills during this period. Though the government initially distributed seedlings of other trees like pine and Bodhi (*ficus religiosa*), according to locals these 'only make green and have little economic value', unlike 'cinnamon'. As a result, the number of Yên Bái Province farmers producing 'cinnamon' has steadily expanded. In 2016, the People's Committee of Yên Bái Province planned to plant almost 20,000 hectares of new 'cinnamon' trees in order to reach a total area of 76,000 hectares by 2020 (Yên Bái Province People's Committee, 2016). Văn Yên District – promoted by local officials as the 'Kingdom of Cinnamon' – already has more than 40,000 hectares planted with 'cinnamon' (Ngoc Thao, 2014; Yên Bái Province People's Committee, 2016).

Commencing at the nurseries

The trees grown in Yên Bái Province's three main 'cinnamon'-producing districts often start as seedlings in local nurseries. Mr Tuan, who operates four such nurseries, each with about two million seedlings, was buying his

6 Local informants predominantly used *quế* in interviews, and in quotes we translate this broadly to cinnamon.

seeds from farmers for VND280,000 [USD 12] per kilogramme in 2017.[7] He germinates and tends to the seeds for nine months before they are ready for transplanting. Some cultivators, however, have expressed suspicion regarding the quality of seedlings sourced from local nurseries. According to one Yao farmer who prefers to germinate seedlings from the seeds of his own mature trees, nurseries sometimes mix 'Chinese and Vietnamese varieties', meaning that farmers risk ending up with 'an inferior Chinese type'. When we asked Mr Tuan, the nursery operator, about these varieties, he rationalised that two types of cassia are grown in Yên Bái: local *Cinnamomum cassia*, which he is adamant originates from the province and is the variety he grows, and what he calls '*Cinnamomum cassia* China' (*quế Tầu*, or Chinese 'cinnamon'), which comprises a different variety. He added that the boom in this spice farming since the 1990s resulted in the increased importation of Chinese seeds, which continue to be much cheaper than those from Vietnam. Considering that, as just discussed, all *Cinnamomum cassia* is known in botanical circles as 'Chinese cassia', this distinction only adds to the confusing nomenclature of the spice – a point we return to later.

Growing 'cinnamon'

Most 'cinnamon' farmers in Yên Bái Province belong to the Yao or Tày ethnic minorities. Regardless of ethnicity, local farmers tend to pursue composite livelihoods that usually involve growing rice for home consumption, harvesting complementary cash crops like bamboo, corn, tea, and mulberry leaves, and raising livestock like pigs and chickens. However, of these cash crop options only 'cinnamon makes you rich' (*quế làm giàu*), according to one commune chairman, who proudly pointed to new houses being constructed in his village thanks to 'cinnamon money'.

Farmers grow 'cinnamon' on the hill slopes surrounding their villages. They plant the seedlings about one metre apart at a density of about 10,000 per hectare and intercrop them with cassava to provide shade and protection from weeds. After three years, the young trees are thinned to 6,000 per hectare, with farmers selling the harvested bark, leaves, and timber. Trees are then pruned twice a year for another eight to ten years to collect leaves and branches for sale. 'Cinnamon' trees are finally completely felled for their bark,

7 Currency conversions are based on the time of interviews throughout this book.

Figure 4.1. 'Cinnamon' plantations in Yên Bái Province, Vietnam. **Colour** p. 149.

timber, and leaves. Non-household labour is often required at these harvesting stages, with workers paid according to the quantities of leaves, branches, or bark collected. The bark is carefully peeled from the stem of the tree and usually sun-dried in hot, dry conditions for two days, although it can also be dried over a fire. It is sometimes also sprinkled with sulphur, which farmers and traders said prevents mould and enhances the colour of the spice.

All the farmers whom we interviewed highlighted the multi-functionality of the crop, with some noting that they 'can sell everything'. The leaves and small branches can be processed into oil or incense, while the timber can be used in construction. However, the most valuable element is the bark, and the thicker the bark, the more costly the spice. Indeed, most of the farmers we interviewed expressed little interest in our questions about species or varieties, instead emphasising the importance of the thickness of the bark, which directly correlated to local grading standards and pricing, as outlined below.

Trade intermediaries in Yên Bái

Before 'cinnamon' grown in Yên Bái reaches the market, it usually goes through the hands of several intermediaries. Farmers commonly sell their 'cinnamon' to local traders with whom they have built trust-based relationships over the years. These relationships enable traders to maintain loyal

Table 4.1. Grading criteria for 'cinnamon' harvested in Yên Bái Province, Vietnam.

Grades	Criteria	Prices traders paid farmers, 2016–2017 (VND/kg)
Grade A	Top quality. Only local 'cinnamon' (not Chinese). Bark 7 mm thick or more; trees need to be over 10 years old.	30,000–36,000
Grades B1–D	*Local or Chinese 'cinnamon' – traders do not seem to mind; whole sticks, broken, or split*	
Grade B1	5–7 mm bark	30,000
Grade B2	3–5 mm bark	19,000
Grade C1	2.5–3 mm bark	16,500–18,000
Grades C2-4	1 mm to 2.5 mm	16,000 and less
Grade C5	1 mm bark or less	16,000 and less
Grade D	Poor quality, mouldy, irregular, etc.	16,000 and less

farmer relationships and hence assure a steady supply of 'cinnamon'. At the same time, farmers trust the traders to provide them with a fair price and can request cash advances for their harvests when necessary. When 'cinnamon' changes hands from cultivators to such traders, the dried bark is assigned a quality ranging from A to D, which determines the price the farmers can gain (see Table 4.1.). The best quality, or Grade A 'cinnamon', has the thickest bark and is usually identified as being only 'local cinnamon' or 'Vietnam cinnamon'. The other grades can consist of both local and/or Chinese 'cinnamon'. While Grade A is typically exported to Western countries, Grade B and C 'cinnamon' tend to be exported to several Asian locations, with Grade D 'cinnamon' usually being sent to China for further processing. Although Grade A bark can be sold for higher prices and is thus potentially more profitable for local intermediaries, the precise expectations of exporters and overseas importers make its trade a more challenging endeavour. Most local intermediaries we met therefore specialize in the trade of lower quality bark, which involves smaller profits, but also less risk.

Most intermediaries sell the 'cinnamon' they collect from local farmers to spice wholesalers in Hanoi and Bắc Ninh Province, who then export the 'cinnamon' more widely, although some large-scale intermediaries in Yên Bái Province also maintain direct links with foreign customers. One trader explained: ‘We sell to India. They come to inspect the goods, and on approval we truck it to Bắc Ninh [to the wholesaler], or pack it in containers for transport to Hải Phòng’. Large-scale intermediaries also reported that foreign importers from South Korea, Japan, and the US come to visit them, not only to negotiate about price and quality but also to visit ‘cinnamon’ plantations to inspect trees and meet the cultivators. These face-to-face meetings are crucial to the ability of local traders and state officials to push a particular narrative regarding ‘Vietnamese ‘cinnamon, discussed shortly.

Large-scale ‘cinnamon’ oil refiners

After being sorted by local intermediaries, dried ‘cinnamon’ sticks and powder pass along their own commodity chains, while bark, twigs, and leaves are processed into ‘cinnamon’ oil. The distillation process for this oil is fairly simple, with all the ‘cinnamon’ material placed into vats with water and heated over wood fires. The first large-scale ‘cinnamon’ oil distilleries in Yên Bái Province were built in 2014, boosting what was previously small-scale, farm-based production. ‘Cinnamon’ oil is now a significant output, especially for export to China, and by 2018 the province boasted four large factories distilling ‘cinnamon’ oil along with several smaller ones. Though the end product, a mix of about 60 per cent oil with water, is not a true essential oil, the high demand from Chinese buyers, who usually buy via exporters in Hanoi or borderland intermediaries in Lào Cai and Lạng Sơn Provinces, continue to drive production.

‘Cinnamon’ wholesalers and exporters

A relatively small amount of Yên Bái ‘cinnamon’ is transported by local intermediaries to Đồng Xuân wholesale market in Hanoi, where it is purchased by vendors from smaller city markets or larger traders based elsewhere in Vietnam (Figure 4.2.). One local expert explained that the ‘cinnamon’ sold on the domestic market is often ‘bad quality with a low price; the good quality cinnamon can’t be sold to Vietnamese people as we can’t afford to buy it’. At local markets, distinctions are mostly made between the different forms and degrees of processing, rather than between particular species or varieties. For instance, thicker peeled sticks that can be marketed as export quality ‘cinnamon’ (*quế xuất khẩu*) were being sold for VND150,000 [USD6.60]

Figure 4.2. 'Cinnamon' at Đồng Xuân market, Hanoi, Vietnam. **Colour** p. 150.

per kilogramme in 2017, whereas the rough, unpeeled, or broken 'cinnamon' could only sell for VND65,000 per kilogramme – although this is still four to five times more than what farmers received (Table 4.1.). Đồng Xuân traders seemed fairly ill-informed about the varieties and origins of the spices they sold. Most knew that the spice was grown somewhere in mountain forests (*núi rừng*), but they seldom knew where in particular, and only a handful mentioned Yên Bái Province as a particularly high-quality source.

Most 'cinnamon' cultivated in Vietnam leaves the country for China, the spice's largest market, with important amounts also being shipped to India, the US, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Like farmers and local traders, wholesalers make distinctions between different quality grades of 'cinnamon' rather than specifying any particular species. The spice is also sorted by whether it is whole, in sticks, split, broken, or powdered, and occasionally by whether it is labelled as organic or not. Top-quality 'cinnamon' is often traded via Singapore, where it is further processed, packaged, and branded on the way to international buyers.

Hence, while local farmers make a distinction between different varieties of the spice, traders and exporters seem far less interested in the origins and species grown in Vietnam, determining prices on the basis of other categorisations, most notably the thickness of the bark. As we have seen, the different actors along the commodity chains, along with botanists, media outlets, and official websites, seem to differ in their understandings of the type and quality of 'cinnamon' that is grown in Vietnam, the taxonomical differences between so-called Chinese and Vietnamese 'cinnamon', and the relevance of these differences for prices. Notwithstanding these confusions and controversies, most actors within Vietnam are strikingly united in their description of the Yên Bái sourced spice as superior quality 'Vietnamese cinnamon'. Our investigation therefore turns to how 'Vietnamese cinnamon' has emerged as a distinctive product.

THE CREATION OF 'VIETNAMESE CINNAMON'

The question of the distinctiveness of 'Vietnamese cinnamon' may appear tangential considering the fact that much of the product grown in Vietnam is transported to China, where it gets mixed with Chinese-sourced cassia varieties regardless of grade. According to one intermediary, it is then re-exported 'without mentioning the source of cinnamon'. Another portion of Vietnam-grown 'cinnamon' transits through the regional wholesale hub of Singapore, where it may be mixed and blended with cassia varieties from other regional producers, such as those from Indonesia, and then re-exported as 'cinnamon' (Madan and Kannan, 2004). The way that all sorts of cassia varieties are routinely combined regardless of origin and grade echoes Tsing's (2013: 35) findings regarding how *matsutake* mushrooms lose any specific regional information regarding their place of origin when exported from Yunnan to Japan, as the privilege of regional labelling is 'reserved for Japan-grown food'. This indistinctiveness of origins is, however, at odds with Vietnamese state campaigns to market local 'cinnamon' as a higher-value product.

Introducing a 'geographical indication'

One Mường farmer, Mr Anh, was adamant about the differences between local and Chinese 'cinnamon', explaining that: 'Chinese cinnamon doesn't taste as sweet and hot as Vietnamese cinnamon. The tree is shorter, and the bark isn't as good. The only advantage is that after drying the weight doesn't change much.' Like Mr Tuan, the aforementioned nursery owner, Mr Anh distinguished between *quế Tầu* (Chinese cinnamon) and *quế bản địa* (local cinnamon). He also suggested that farmers in the area used to grow 'Chinese cinnamon', but that they have nearly all switched to the 'local' variety.

While these ideas of taxonomy clearly conflict with the scientific categorisations discussed above, this supposed shift undertaken by Yên Bái Province farmers towards favouring 'local cinnamon' has been actively promoted by the Vietnamese state and international development organisations. One Dutch development organisation in particular worked with local government officials to market 'local cinnamon' during a three-year project involving subsidised 'local' seedlings, drying ovens, and various branding strategies. Despite the effort such individuals put into cultivating and marketing 'local cinnamon', the term proves nearly impossible to define. According to one former project adviser with experience in quality control and the organic certification of 'local Yên Bái cinnamon', there is actually no scientific evidence regarding any of the presumed differences between varieties. In fact, he explained, a great deal of cross-border intermixing had occurred between Vietnamese and Chinese trees. Such ambiguity with regard to the actual plant involved did not, however, prevent the adviser from encouraging farmers to cultivate 'local cinnamon' in order to 'maintain good quality as well as preserve its originality for traceability'.

Geographical indication (GI) certification systems rely heavily on the ability to define and convey 'the geographical origin, as well as the cultural and historical identity, of an agricultural product' (Bowen, 2010: 210). Because they enable global consumers to create associations between quality, place, and taste, GIs have gained attention for their potential to enhance the profits of farmers in the Global South (Bowen, 2010; UNCTAD, 2015; Pick et al., 2017). The Vietnamese state has certainly taken note of this, launching a top-down management framework and strong public policies for advancing GIs (Pick et al., 2017), as noted in Chapter 2. The Văn Yên District People's Committee, supported by the *Agence française de développement* (AFD) and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), accordingly registered the GI for Văn Yên cinnamon in 2010 (FAO, 2016; Pick et al., 2017). In a national newspaper article, the People's Committee Vice-Chairman explained that the GI registration helped to 'increase the value of the local specialty' as well as maintain and conserve 'genetic resources and strengthen the promotion of Văn Yên cinnamon products to domestic and international markets in a sustainable manner' (Nguyen, 2014).[8]

8 Other 'cinnamon' varieties in Vietnam are also registered as GI products. 'Trà My cinnamon' (Quảng Nam Province, central Vietnam) was registered in 2011 and

On the ground, however, the farmers we spoke to were less enthusiastic about the GI certification. The GI initially pertained to only about 20,000 hectares in eight of Văn Yên District's 27 communes (Cục Sở hữu trí tuệ, n.d.; Nguyen, 2014). One farmer, Mr Cuong, complained that since he used seedlings obtained in Văn Yên District, his 'cinnamon' – planted in a neighbouring district – was essentially identical, and although not technically covered by the GI, he planned to label his product as certified anyway. The vast majority of farmers and traders, however, had never heard of the GI when we asked. They also seemed uninterested in the concept, stating that current quality measures and their trade relations were sufficient. It is therefore questionable whether this GI will facilitate tangible improvements to local livelihoods.

These findings regarding Yên Bái 'cinnamon' echo what we found regarding the introduction of a GI label for star anise from Lạng Sơn in 2007 (see Chapter 2). Farmers there seemed similarly uninformed of the star anise GI, while overseas star anise traders preferred not to buy GI-certified spice from local export companies when they wanted to alter or hide its origins to keep their supply sources secret (see also Pick et al., 2017: 327). Likewise, when we searched the websites of major 'cinnamon' export companies in Vietnam, we found no mention of the GI for Văn Yên 'cinnamon'. We therefore question the extent to which these GI initiatives, driven by outside actors like state and development agencies, truly bolster the economic position of Vietnamese spice producers on the global market. In the words of one foreign spice trader:

> The GI is not relevant at all. The initiatives are entirely done by … outsiders in NGOs. They stop in for a few months and meetings, leave their imprint and move on. I've seen five cycles of NGOs work on this now, and heard of two more. … It may have made some foreigners feel good, but it never increased the value or contributed to anything but market chaos and skimming … European and UN funds for houses and vehicles.

In defence of some of the NGO projects in Yên Bái Province, a few farmers we interviewed expressed appreciation of features such as the 'cinnamon' drying ovens that these organisations had introduced. In addition, as exemplified by the statements of Mr Anh and Mr Cuong, 'cinnamon' producers are not just 'passive subjects of discourses', but indeed people who 'adopt and

'Thường Xuân cimnnamon' (Thanh Hóa Province, north coastal Vietnam) was noted to be in the process of being registered as of 2017 (Pick et al., 2017: 315-316), but we could not find evidence that this had been successful by 2021.

adapt these discourses … by laying claim to greater decrees of authenticity or higher ecological standards' (Bidwell et al., 2018b: 7). However, the GI designation for Yên Bái 'cinnamon' seems to have been somewhat of a marketing failure to date. What has proven far more successful in branding local 'cinnamon' is an appeal to historicised and exoticised images of places and producers.

Creating a speciality product

Although the main motivation for a GI is the concept that a good can be assigned some essential value based on its geographic origin, consumers may care more about a marketed image and branding than the location of cultivation (Hull, 2016). The promotion of 'Vietnamese cinnamon' is an especially clear – and indeed somewhat absurd – case. One French spice company markets 'cannelle de Saïgon' as a rare spice with a strong flavour, native to the 'province of Saigon' (Ducros, n.d.), despite the fact that no Vietnamese province has been named Saigon since 1976, nor is 'cinnamon' cultivated in that area. Sahale Snacks, the company that promotes Yên Bái's spice as the 'champagne of cinnamon', claims on its website that 'unexploded bombs lie on the same land where cinnamon forests like to grow [… but the] good news is that … a Seattle-based humanitarian organization [is] working in central Vietnam to help clear the farmlands'. Yên Bái, however, is not in central Vietnam, and it is unlikely that the areas where their 'carefully sourced' 'cinnamon' grows were heavily bombed. The purpose of this image of a (fictional) war-torn locale is to conjure remoteness, danger, and inaccessibility, thereby enhancing the distinctiveness of this company's products. In a promotional video, the CEO of another large US-based organic produce wholesaler describes travelling 'almost to the end of the world, literally' to visit Vietnam's major 'cinnamon' growing region and provide aid for children to attend school. In the opening scene, viewers are told that they can 'make a difference with Vietnamese cinnamon', which is now back on the international market after an absence of 'more than 20 years due to the Vietnam War' (Frontier Co-op., n.d.). A suggestion is thus made that buying 'Vietnamese cinnamon' is also an act of humanitarianism. These retailers' marketing of Vietnamese 'cinnamon' utilises stylised imaginings of place that emphasise remoteness and recall the colonial era and the Vietnam War, a theme discussed further in Chapter 7.

The way cultivators are portrayed by Vietnamese state news outlets similarly highlights the spice's distinctiveness, albeit through other images. Although most 'cinnamon' farmers in the province are members of the Yao and Tày ethnic minority groups, some Hmong, Mường, and ethnic majority Kinh also cultivate the spice. Nevertheless, reports on Yên Bái 'cinnamon' found on Communist Party, Voice of Vietnam, and official news websites consistently show photographs of Yao 'cinnamon' farmers in colourful ethnic minority clothing (Communist Party of Vietnam Newspaper, 2016; Thua Xuan, 2016). These pictures particularly feature women toiling in the fields – despite the fact that men also cultivate the spice, and farmers certainly do not wear their best attire while engaging in agricultural work.

The links between 'cinnamon', gender, and ethnicity are also made in promotional videos produced by development agencies and exporters and during the new, but now annual, 'Văn Yên cinnamon fair', where ethnic minority traditions are put on display. A recurrent theme is the Yao custom for women to receive 'cinnamon' trees as part of their dowry (*của hồi môn*). Children also inherit the trees they have planted and taken care of (see Nguyen Hanh, 2016). Nonetheless, Yao farmers we talked to did not find this particularly noteworthy; they explained to us that all children, both boys and girls, help adults grow 'cinnamon' and partake equally in land inheritance. Hence, the overstated portrayal of Yao culture's relationship to the spice is not so much related to actual practices but rather exemplifies a majority Kinh exoticisation of 'the other' (World Bank, 2009), strategically employing narratives about gender, ethnicity, and culture to craft Văn Yên 'cinnamon' as an authentic, indigenous specialty product. Of course, this indigeneity only exists at the very start of the commodity chains, as the majority of actors with the power to develop provincial policies or promote cassia to foreign buyers are Kinh.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we have shown, actors along 'cinnamon' commodity chains originating in Vietnam have shaped this product as either the 'champagne of cinnamon' or a 'bastard spice', exemplifying the complex ways that agro-food value is created. After entering the global market in the 1990s, growers and exporters in Vietnam sought niches for their spice as they found themselves competing with both prized Ceylon cinnamon and cheaper, mass-produced Chinese and Indonesian cassia varieties. A distinctive narrative thus became central to augmenting the value of their product. However, much of Vietnam's exported spice becomes 'faceless' and 'sourceless' as it enters the international markets, either in China or via Singapore. By tracing these commodity chains, we have been able to reveal the complexities of assigning value to Vietnamese 'cinnamon' and the involvement of contradictory imaginings – or not – of geographies, gender, ethnicity, and botanical taxonomies. As Appadurai (1986: 44) noted: 'Whenever there are discontinuities in the knowledge that accompanies the movement of commodities, problems involving authenticity and expertise enter the picture'.

As a result, depending on the actors and spatial scales being interrogated, taxonomies and categorisations of cassia varieties cultivated in northern Vietnam prove to be highly fluid and contested. Acting alongside these commodity chains, the provincial government and international NGO partners emphasise the distinctiveness of 'Vietnamese cinnamon' – particularly 'Yên Bái cinnamon' – as a specialty spice distinct from the Chinese variety and one that should be protected by a geographical indication. Another set of actors, most notably Global North importers and retailers, leverage exoticised images of a remote, war-torn locale and ethnic minority women cultivators, to carve out a niche for this 'cinnamon'. This is in an effort to entice consumers who consider their tastes refined and for whom environmental and social concerns weigh heavily. Yet at the same time, we observe how Vietnam-sourced 'cinnamon' undergoes a politics of devaluation (Bair and Werner, 2011) in the eyes of those who question its distinctiveness: traders and importers from other regions, especially China, as well as several botanists.

This raises the questions of how value is created along these commodity chains and who benefits. At the moment, the relative prosperity of 'cinnamon' cultivators compared to other ethnic minority farmers in the region can be traced to rising global demand for the spice, especially Chinese demand for lower-quality supplies. Cultivators seem to benefit the most from selling an indistinct product on the global market. In the long term, though, these farmers are at the whim of a global market dominated by Chinese and Indonesian producers (Piyasiri and Wijeratne, 2016), who could increase output and depress prices. As noted above, different 'strategies of de-commodification' that seek to differentiate and add value to a product like 'cinnamon' based upon its quality, geography, or the identity of its cultivators, aim to protect producers from such price volatility. The attempt to create a niche market through a geographical indication was spearheaded by the Vietnamese state as well as various international development agencies, with global retailers in turn adding value through the marketing of this 'authentic' product as cultivated in a remote location by ethnically distinctive people, hence mobilising origin and ethnicity in the commodification of the spice.

Despite efforts like these to enhance value, these strategies of harnessing social and spatial relations for economic profit appear to have failed to provide tangible benefits for local producers. One of the reasons for this undesirable outcome is the highly uneven distribution of both botanical and marketing knowledge between the nodes along these commodity chains. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that the success of a GI designation 'depends strongly on the producers' collective organisation and [their] knowledge and skills about GIs' (Pick et al., 2017: 330). However, local knowledge of – or even interest in – the economic potential of Yên Bái's 'cinnamon' GI was low among ethnic minority cultivators. This lack of knowledge among cultivators mirrors the lack of awareness, and also of interest, among Global North consumers in the precise geographic origins of the spice. One former import company employee noted that 'every economic incentive, in fact, supports continued obfuscation' of the origins of 'cinnamon' behind a veil of exoticised, fanciful branding. Indeed, as we have shown, the marketing of Vietnamese 'cinnamon' as a speciality product is seldom based on any precise location or truthful understandings of the cultivators involved. Hence, there are few 'bridges between worlds of knowledge' in these commodity chains (Appadurai, 1986: 42). In our view, this fragmentation will need to be overcome if GIs and other attempts to connect cultivators with consumers are to succeed in their socio-economic goals.

Our findings highlight the need for commodity chain scholarship to more fully consider how actors augment value and spread or restrict knowledge transfer from node to node. While accumulation of knowledge and profits at the end nodes of the commodity chains is part of the problem, cultivators themselves also tend to err on the side of straighforward, low-risk strategies, and have a well-founded suspicion of – or pure disinterest in – the economic machinations of distant outsiders. Far from being 'passive recipients of, if not obstacles to, agricultural innovations and market opportunities', as they are often portrayed in scholarship on agricultural value chains (cf. Bassett et al., 2018: 1244), our research demonstrates the benefits of centring cultivators in analyses of commodity value creation and acknowledging their agency in livelihood decision making. The ethnic minority 'cinnamon' farmers at the heart of this research variously seize specific trade opportunities and ignore others as they deploy nuanced – if incomplete – knowledge of their geographical location, traditional trade links to China, and market volatility. If outsiders like development agencies, state officials, and global retailers are to legitimately support commodity chains in the Global South and make a positive impact on cultivators' lives, they must therefore recognise local knowledge systems and the perspectives of ethnic minority actors.

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