

Working the Rural-Urban Divide: Alexander Day Traces a Century of Agricultural Modernisation in China's Present-Day Tea Capital

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Alexander F. Day is a historian of modern and contemporary China, focusing on peasants, food, and agrarian change. His forthcoming book takes tea as a lens on agricultural modernization. Situated in *Meitan* county in *Guizhou* province—the county that currently boasts the largest planted area of tea in China—his research traces the interplay of tea, labor, and political economy and the shift from household production to industrialisation from the 1920s to the present. Day combines archival research and fieldwork, making regular trips to *Meitan*, where he collaborates with local tea historians. His work connects the past and the present, and provides insights into how studying the contemporary period sheds light on earlier periods and vice versa. The following is a lightly edited version of our interview about Alexander's current book project.



Workers preparing soil for tea planting in Meitan, early 1960s. Photo used with permission of the China Tea Industrialization Museum in Meitan, Guizhou, China.

Mindi: *Your current book project is a history of tea production in Southwestern China from the 1920s to the present. How did you come to this topic, and what are your central questions?*

Alexander: For one, my first book was a historical look at contemporary debates on the peasant and how the changing figure of the peasant relates to visions of historical

transformation and politics. Although I went to the countryside quite a bit in the process of doing research to visit various projects, the arguments in that first book were from a rather abstract view, distanced from the actual countryside. As I got thinking about what I would do next, I wanted to get out of Beijing and spend more time in the countryside - especially in a specific location - to research

and watch the developing importance of a place. I decided to base myself in *Meitan* county in *Guizhou* province.

I also wanted to move more towards the social history and political economy of rural China. More specifically, I was inspired by Jacob Eyferth's book, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots*, a study of a community of handicraft papermakers in rural Sichuan. Eyferth showed how the rural-urban split—the contemporary politics of which I investigated in my first book—was produced in the 20th century through the industrialization of handicraft industries. I wanted to follow a different commodity, one a bit closer to a food product, to see how this split occurred. I landed on tea production.

As a processed agricultural commodity, the whole tea production process can take place within a single household, or it can be divided into farming and initial drying taking place on the farm, and final processing, blending, and packaging in more factory-type situations. In other words, the rural-urban divide can take place within the labor process itself. I have

been looking at how the process of moving from the first form to the latter occurred—the industrialization of tea processing—including what effects it had socially and how it spatially transformed tea production and *Meitan* county. Further, I wanted to look at tea production in the Southwest in particular because it was less tied into the export market than in central and eastern China. In this context, I can watch the shift from household production to industrialization over about a 100-year period up to the present.

Mindi: *What's distinctive about tea for studying the labor process?*

Alexander: The two book-length studies of tea production in China leading up to the period I focus on, one by Robert Gardella and the other by Andrew Liu, both show the decline of Chinese tea production under the pressure of competition from British India. Liu argued that the labor process of Chinese tea producers underwent some transformation because of this competition, but that competitive pressure was not just felt in terms of price competition but, probably



Workers grading tea leaves in Meitan, early 1960s. Photo used with permission of the China Tea Industrialization Museum in Meitan, Guizhou, China.

more importantly, in terms the quality of the commodity produced. The much smaller scale producers in China produced tea of uneven quality compared to that of new competitors. One of the key trends that I am tracking is how this problem of tea quality led to a push for greater control over the labor process of tea production, initially in processing, but also on the farming end as well. Quality comes to mean different things at different times, depending on the overall structure of the political economy of agricultural production. So, once the Nationalist state comes to focus on raising tea production and exports in the mid-1920s, tea “quality” suggests the production of generic enough tea of a particular quality grade to be blended and sold for export. This remains true into the 1970s, though the structure of tea production and the political economy changes. From the 1980s, with the spread of tea production back into the household, quality tends to decline, but a focus on more unique qualities of tea grows along with the domestic market. This laid the groundwork for new forms of industrialization and vertical integration of tea production as *uniqueness* becomes the key to domestic sales.

Overall, crucial in this long trajectory is that under different political economies different forms of integration of the two main aspects of tea production implied different ways to control the labor process. So, under the Nationalists from the 1930s through the 1940s, the state focused on controlling tea processing by concentrating processing in industrial facilities and improving technical processes. Tea farming was only transformed to a minor degree. Under the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s and 1960s, tea farming and processing was integrated in a very concentrated form, with all processes directed from the top down within a single production unit. From the late-1960s, however, some tea farming and initial processing was dispersed to agricultural communes and brigades. This decentralization was accelerated in the 1980s, as commune and brigade tea production was turned over to household. It was only after the domestic tea market boomed from the late 1990s, that a new form of vertical integration took hold in the industry, with the labor process of farming indirectly controlled

by mostly private processing firms through contracts and cooperatives.

Mindi: *How do you conceptualize tea in this study? (Is it background, is it the topic, is it a lens, is it a human-nature relation, etc.)*

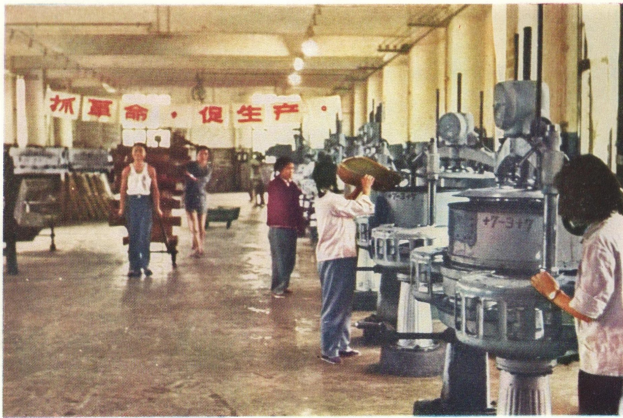
Alexander: In this study, I mainly look at tea as the result of a set of biophysical and labor processes. As I said, those processes come to be controlled in various ways at different times. So part of my study of the labor process of tea production looks at how the labor process intervenes in and is shaped by the biophysical processes of the tea plant. While the labor process can intervene in the nature process—the biophysical process of the plant—those biophysical processes create friction for production as well. From the 1940s, technicians and workers in the *Meitan* tea industry continually attempt to change and shape the biophysical processes of the tea plants there, by breeding, changing fertilization methods, changing processing technology, etc. And, of course, all of these involve controlling and changing the labor process. As a social history and political economy, it is important to stress that while the biophysical nature of the tea plant creates frictions as well as opportunities for tea producers, it is labor and the control over the labor process that are the agents in this story.

Mindi: *The period of your study – 1920s to the present – spans profound political economic changes in China. Why is this particular period important for your research?*

Alexander: This study tries to retell the story of agricultural modernization through the transformation of a single agricultural commodity in a specific county. This is a particularly important period for the modernization and industrialization of tea production, newly under pressure from global capitalist competition. While the transformation begins a little earlier in Eastern China, in the Southwest, tea was less integrated into the international market until the 1930s, especially following the Japanese invasion in 1937. Thus in *Meitan*, for the most part, the whole process was located within households until the beginning of 1940, when the Nationalists set up an experimental tea farm and processing factory there. Tea was small scale, distributed, and mostly consumed

by the household that produced it. When this transformation begins in earnest in 1940, the Nationalist state and its local representatives are there to document its progression.

Originally, I was going to end the study in the 1970s, but as I visited *Meitan* several times from 2015 on, the county became the largest tea producer by planted area (although another county claims it has since regained the title). I increasingly felt the contemporary period of reintegration helped us to understand the earlier developments there, in particular, how the overall political economy of society shaped forms of integration and labor control in the industry.



涪潭茶场的揉捻车间一角。

“A corner of the kneading and twisting workshop in the Meitan Tea Factory”, late 1960s. Photo used with permission of the China Tea Industrialization Museum in Meitan, Guizhou, China.

Mindi: *The rural-urban split in China is central in much of your work. In your first book you looked at the role of the peasant in the reform-era (post-1978) rural-urban split, and your current book examines the role of the labor process in producing the 20th century split. Can you explain the rural-urban split, and its importance to your study of the history of capitalism in China?*

Alexander: As in other places, capitalism’s emergence produced spatial unevenness in China, as did the halting attempt to escape the dynamics of capitalism from the 1950s through the 1970s. As others have also stressed, the rural-urban split that I look at is a modern phenomenon. The divide, such an important topic in China especially from the late 1990s into the 2000s, can look rather abstract in the discussions of intellectuals and

policy makers in Beijing. But on the ground, it is produced in many different ways with differing temporalities and periodizations depending on how you study it. The emergence of the rural-urban split in *Meitan’s* tea production, in other words, is a quite different story than that of Eyferth’s papermakers in Sichuan, even if both could be conceptualized as producing a rural-urban divide.

When the Nationalist experimental tea farm and factory arrived in *Meitan* in 1940, the county was overwhelming rural and the county town quite small. But as the process factory was taken over by the new Socialist state in the early 1950s, the county town grew along with it. In other words, as labor processes originally contained within the household were divided and subsumed under the state industrial structure, the spatial structure of the county shifted, a rural-urban divide emerged within the county itself. But the process didn’t stop there, in the 1960s a new processing factory was built in the fields themselves and some production returned to the “rural” in the communes and brigades, only to disperse even more in the 1980s back into rural households. These transformations continue today, producing new forms of unevenness.

Mindi: *How do you see the rural-urban divide in relation to social reproduction in any of the periods you study?*

Alexander: When looking at the organization of production and control over labor, the issue of social reproduction is front and center. *Meitan* was a quite poor, rural county when the Nationalists arrived looking for a place to set up the model tea farm and processing factory in 1939. While rural China has been quite commercialized for a long period of time, commercialization was very uneven, and looking at tea production in *Meitan*, most households that produced tea processed and consumed it in the household or at most sold it into the local market. And this is true of other agricultural goods as well. In other words, there wasn’t a clear divide between production and social reproduction—both were contained within the family form.

My study, in a sense, tracks the breaking apart of that family form and the continual restructuring and reorganization of production and social reproduction in a series of new forms. So in the 1940s, a divide is introduced between tea growing and processing, with the latter beginning industrialization and tea undergoing commodification. As processing enters the factory, social reproduction remains in the household. The county town grows and is transformed from a mainly administrative and small commercial population to one that now undertakes production; likewise, production itself is split between rural villages and the more urban county town. Under the CCP in the 1950s, both farming and processing tea is taken over by the state-owned factory but certain features of social reproduction are also increasingly controlled by the factory as well, in part to reduce labor costs.

Both aspects, however, largely return to the family in the 1980s, and tea production devolves and spreads back into households. As this happens, rural labor in the county migrates to more distant urban centers, while other members of the family remain in rural *Meitan*, where kids are raised and farming continues. In the 2000s, as tea farming takes on a new, more industrialized form of integration, labor flows back into *Meitan* to a certain extent; in fact, as the tea industry recently expanded dramatically, migrant labor from neighboring counties began to do seasonal work in Meitan's tea industry. So while the control over labor or the labor process is a central concern of the project, so too is how labor is reproduced, how both are continually changed through a series of spatial and formal transformations.

Mindi: *How do you see the rural-urban divide playing out in labor and/or peasant politics today?*

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¹ See Day, A.F. and Schneider, M. 2018. "The End of Alternatives? Capitalist Transformation, Rural Activism and the Politics of Possibility in China," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(7): 1221-1246.



Worker loading tea leaves to be fired in Meitan, 2018. Photo: Alexander Day.

Alexander: The classic, sharp institutional rural-urban divide, largely a product of the political economy of the second half of the twentieth century, is dissolving at present. This does not mean that divisions have completely disappeared, but that institutional differences have lessened and flows increased. Over the past 20 years, capitalist agrarian change has picked up speed; land transfers have escalated; and, more permanent urbanization of once-rural populations has increased. With these changes, I would argue that the Reform Period is now over. One of the side effects of these changes is that some of the politics of possibility in rural China have been foreclosed as well¹. For example, while the number of rural cooperatives has climbed dramatically over this period, the form they have taken has been fashioned by the capitalist context in which they have emerged. The more politicized forms of collectives promoted by rural activists have been sharply curtailed. While various kinds of rural politics may still be possible, I think critical politics of the excluded is less and less determined by the rural-urban divide compared to 20 years ago.



Fields of tea in Meitan county, Guizhou province, China. Source: Alexander Day: 2016.



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*All photos provided by Alexander Day.

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