

Anxiety of food nationalism: Dilemmas of bordering in the Vietnam–Taiwan tea trade

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In Taiwan, *bentu* (or *bendi*) is a term emphasizing local food and agriculture, similar to “localness” in the concept of local food systems (LFS). The term also demonstrates the complex, inseparable relationship between local food movements and food nationalism in Taiwan. This paper examines the politics of *bentu* in Taiwan's food movements in order to reconsider the relationship between the relocalization of agri-food systems and the politics of bordering regarding food nationalism. This approach chimes with recent scholarship concerned with relocating border studies, in political geography in particular, and provides a way of critically understanding the borderwork that takes place beyond the national borders. We use the case of the tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan to illustrate how borders around *bentu* food products can be simultaneously porous and fixed. During the 1990s Taiwanese entrepreneurs and tea merchants established tea plantations and factories in Vietnam to meet increasing Taiwanese market demand. However, Vietnamese tea has been stigmatized as inferior due to concerns about pesticide residue and quality control. Yet while *bentu* protectionists of Taiwanese tea have drawn and re-drawn the symbolic and spatial borders to constrain the mobility of Vietnamese tea, tea producers in Vietnam have practised a variety of strategies to re-mobilize their tea to cross spatial and symbolic borders into Taiwan. Thus, we argue, the “movement” of *bentu* food encompasses two dimensions: a social movement to fix the boundaries of local tea for food nationalism, and movement as the discrepant patterns of mobility of both humans and non-humans – tea producers and tea trees in our case – that can challenge attempts to shore up a purified vision of the *bentu*. As such, *bentu* has been a mechanism for the construction of a symbolically distinct but spatially blurred space for Taiwanese tea.

KEYWORDS

authenticity, *bentu*, culinary nationalism, gastronationalism, local food, mobility

1 | INTRODUCTION

Criticisms of the extension of food chains under globalized agriculture have included strong calls for the shortening of the distance between food production and consumption. Local food systems (LFS), a “loose subsumption of alternative and oppositional food system ideas” (Feagan, 2007, p. 24), have been amongst the concepts mobilized to oppose the prevailing

globalization of food systems. One major feature of LFS is the re-spatialization of food production and consumption on a local scale. As Feagan stated (2007, p. 24; italics as per original), “The *relocalization* orientation of LFS movements is partly derivative of early sustainability directives calling for decentralization, democratization, self-sufficiency and subsidiarity – all spatially referenced concepts.” At the same time, understanding the politics of local agri-food systems also requires “careful circumspection and greater clarity regarding how we delineate and understand the ‘local’” (2007, p. 23; see also DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). One critical but relatively less explored dimension is the relationship between local food and food nationalism.

Contemporary food movements have commonly invoked *the local* as a label for emerging food initiatives that aim to provide alternatives to global networks of food production, distribution, and consumption. Yet, the delineation and understanding of localness needs attention to unravel its complex associations with food nationalism. As Ichijo and Ranta (2016, p. 4) argued, “While ethnic or local food may compete or collide with national food, the former is often incorporated in the latter.” In other words, local food items or practices under the general LFS heading could in fact closely relate to the building of national identity. As such, and echoing Feagan's (2007) caution on the meanings of localness in LFS, this paper pays attention to the inseparability of local food movements and food nationalism in a specific socioeconomic, political, and cultural context – that of Taiwan.

In Taiwan, *bentu* or *bendi* is a term emphasizing local food and agriculture, a similar idea to “localness” in LFS. The term also demonstrates the complexity and inseparability of local food movements and food nationalism in Taiwan, also characterized as “gastronationalism” (DeSoucey, 2010, 2016). Literally, *bentu* or *bendi* (*bentu* for the rest of the paper) means “original land,” “original soil,” or “original place” in Chinese. *Bentu* is similar to the English usage “localness,” and relates local food and agriculture to “environmentally-friendly” (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005), “organic” (Stagl, 2002), “*terroir*” (Gade, 2004), “peasant empowerment” (Lacy, 2000), and “community-based” (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005) values, amongst others that are also associated with the concerns of LFS on food justice and ethics. Meanwhile, *bentu* in Taiwan has strong connotations of “localization for nationalism.” Accordingly, *bentu* is used here as a key term to highlight the co-constitution among local food movement, food localism, and food nationalism in the Taiwanese context. The term also helps to avoid the scalar trap (Born & Purcell, 2006; Galt, 2008) that presents a homogenous and romanticized concept of production and consumption under a vague local or national label. At the same time, *bentu* in Taiwan can still serve as a powerful agent of territorialization, through the politics of boundary drawing.

This paper examines the politics of *bentu* in Taiwan's food movement in order to reconsider the relationship between the relocalization of agri-food systems and the politics of bordering associated with food nationalism. This approach chimes with recent scholarship concerned with relocating border studies, from political geography in particular (Jones & Johnson, 2014), which provides a way of critically understanding the borderwork that takes place beyond the national borders. Its specific focus is the relationship between Taiwan's *bentu* movement and (de)bordering processes in the tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan. This case illustrates how the boundaries delimited by *bentu* are simultaneously both porous and fixed, a paradox that is a product of the interaction between *bentu* food discourses and socio-technical institutions at local, national, and cross-border scales. The origins of the tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan lie in the “Southward Policy” (*nanxiang zhengce*) launched in the 1990s by Taiwanese President Lee Teng-Hui to divert Taiwanese outward investment from China to Southeast Asia (see Lee, 2015). In this policy context, Taiwanese entrepreneurs and tea merchants established tea plantations and factories in Vietnam, primarily in the province of Lam Dong. But, crucially, instead of using local Vietnamese tea trees, these Taiwanese entrepreneurs and tea merchants introduced new tea tree varieties developed in Taiwan, as well as the full “package” of processing techniques from Taiwan, including machines, processing know-how, plantation management practices, and so on. In other words, even if they were located in Vietnam, these enterprises aimed to produce what their operators believed to be legitimate “Taiwanese” tea.

In Taiwan, the production of tea has declined (Figure 1) over recent decades for a variety of reasons, including increasing production costs and the ageing of the agricultural workforce in tea production areas. However, domestic demand for tea has increased, mainly due to increased consumption of bottled teas, the growth of chains selling tea-based beverages like bubble tea, and the sale of tea products as touristic souvenirs. Tea imports, mainly from Vietnam, have increased in the face of this growing demand. At the same time, public sentiment advocating the protection of local agriculture in line with the ethos of the *bentu* food movement has also emerged in Taiwan, and has promoted a discourse that emphasizes the authenticity of local agriculture, including tea production (see Writer, 2017). As a consequence, the decreasing yield of locally produced tea leaves has been characterized as the only authentically Taiwanese tea. By contrast, many see Vietnamese tea, including that produced by Taiwanese tea entrepreneurs in Lam Dong, as an interloper that threatens to tarnish the authenticity of the local tea industry.

Bentu therefore implies a “power of exclusion” (Hall et al., 2011), operating both spatially and symbolically in the bordering processes of agri-food production and consumption, through the emphasis on the authenticity of local Taiwanese tea. Hall et al. (2011, p. 7, italics as per original) define exclusion as “referring to the ways in which people are *prevented* from benefiting from things,” with “things” in this case meaning “land.” Here we extend the meaning of “things” to “tea.” Under the ethos of protecting the so-called *bentu* Taiwanese tea production, those who transplanted tea varieties and transferred processing techniques from Taiwan to Vietnam have been *prevented* from benefitting from the *bentu* movement of Taiwanese tea, even though they believe they do produce Taiwanese tea, albeit in Vietnam. As a result, they cannot participate in the *bentu* movement of Taiwanese tea.

Hall et al. (2011) define the power of exclusion in four dimensions: regulation, the market, force, and legitimation. Among these four inter-related dimensions, regulation has been most closely associated with the borderwork of boundary-drawing. Focusing on the issue of land, Hall et al. (2011, p. 15, italics as per original) argue that “regulations determine the *boundaries* between pieces of land,” and “they prescribe the kinds of *land use* that are and are not acceptable within those boundaries.” Extending this to tea and the *bentu* movement, *bentu* in Taiwan has been practised through a variety of regulations to strengthen the protection of local Taiwanese tea, such as tea competitions and pesticide checks at customs points. This turns out to be a bordering process which prescribes the kinds of tea that are and are not acceptable within the national border of Taiwan. On the other hand, the mobility of tea and processing techniques has then become a de-bordering force which challenges the meaning of authentic local Taiwanese tea under the *bentu* movement.

With the power of exclusion from the *bentu* movement in Taiwan, the overwhelming emphasis on local authenticity in food discourse has constructed an antagonistic relationship between tea produced in Vietnam and that produced in Taiwan. Below we investigate the paradoxical meanings of *bentu* in the contestations concerning the tea trade between Taiwan and Vietnam. We first look into *bentu* through a theoretical framework for rethinking the interaction between food nationalism,

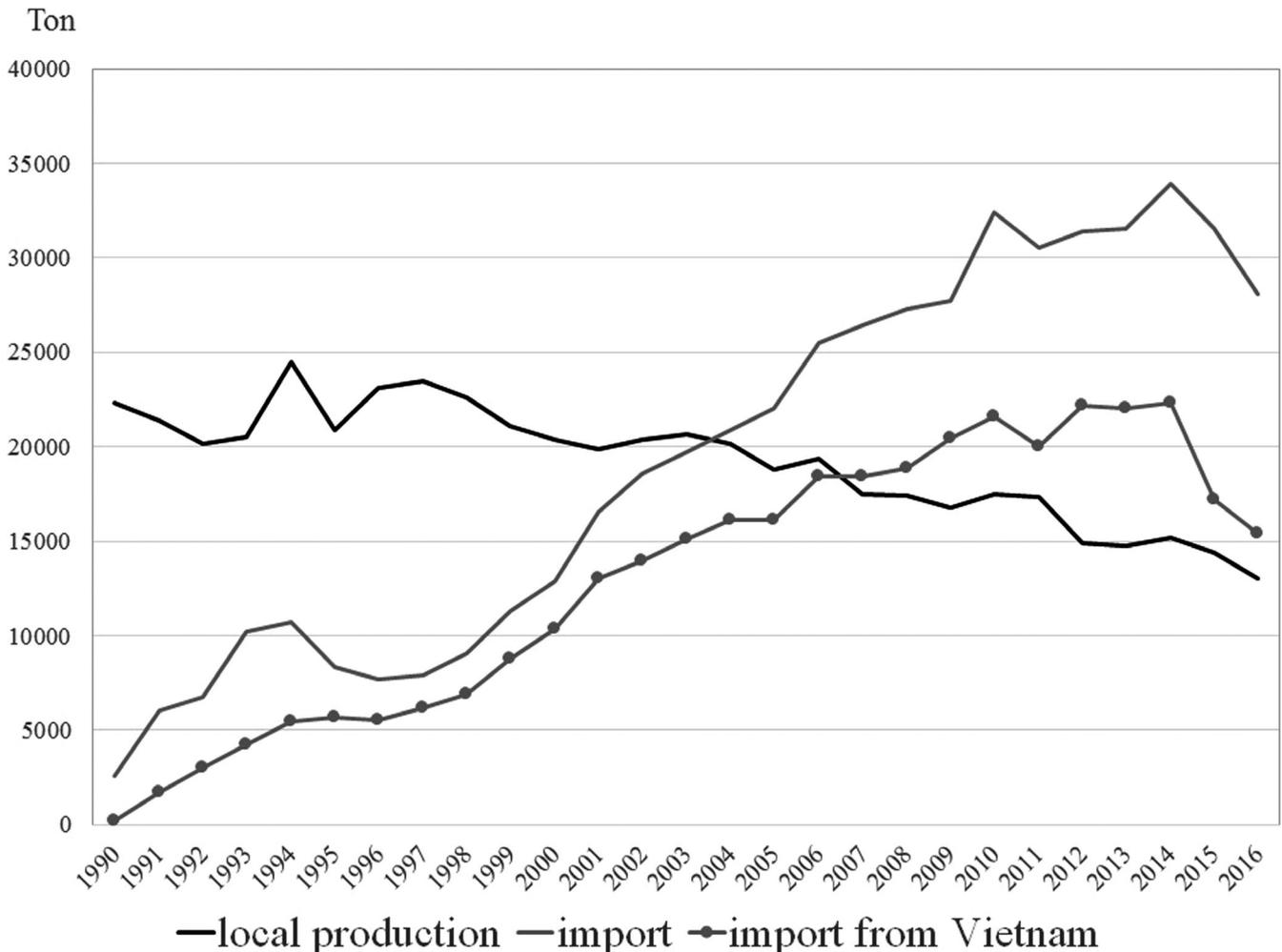


FIGURE 1 Overall local production, overall import, and Vietnamese imports of tea in Taiwan.

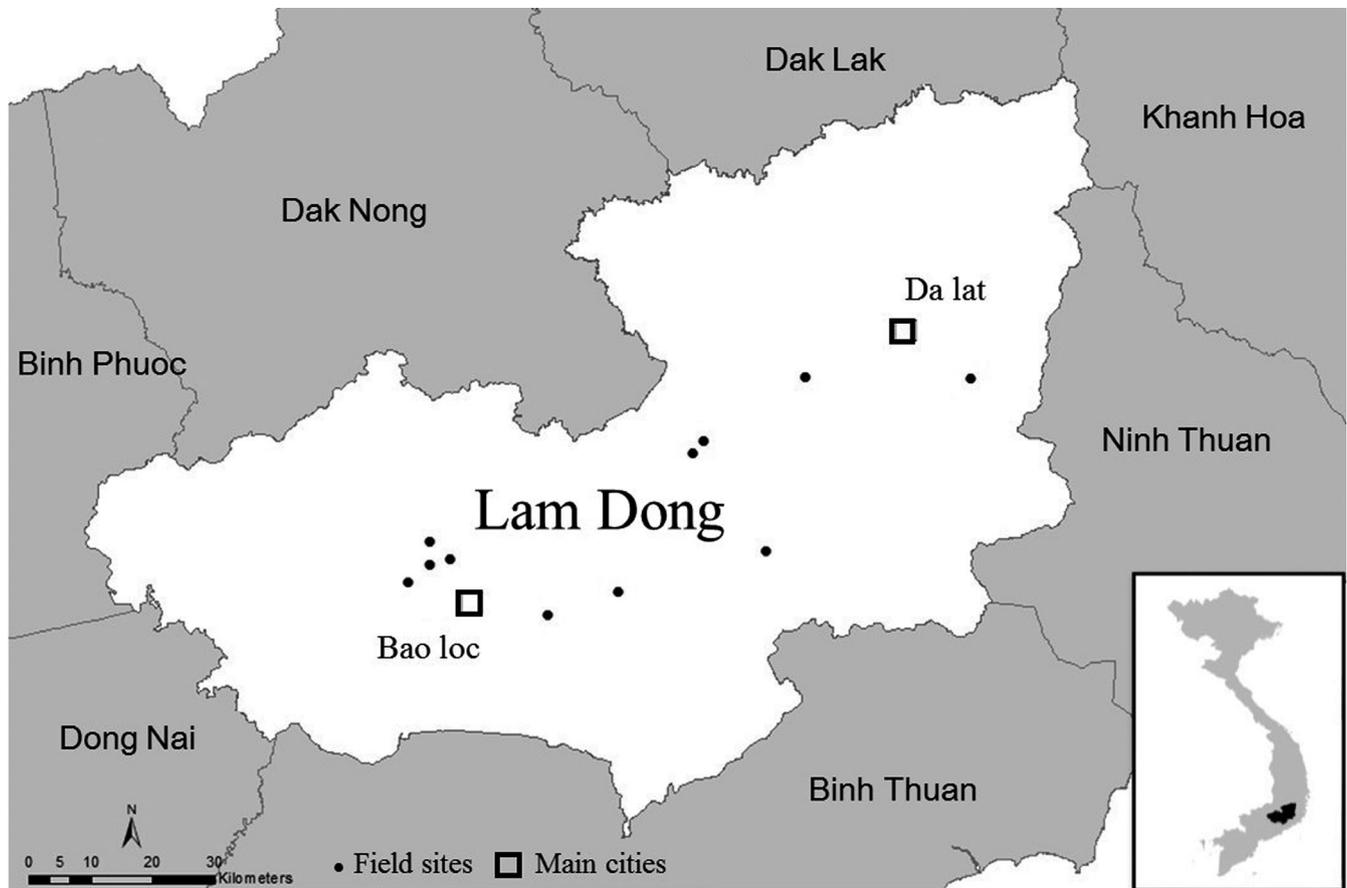


FIGURE 2 Fieldwork Sites in Lam Dong Province, Vietnam.

local agri-food systems, and border studies. Next we outline our research methods and introduce the fieldwork site. Following this, the empirical analysis of this paper will treat the two main stages of tea production—cultivation and processing—separately to tease out the different socio-technical practices by which *bentu* has been a mechanism with which to construct a symbolically distinct but spatially blurred space for Taiwanese tea.

2 | BENTU, FOOD NATIONALISM, AND BORDER STUDIES

Bentu, as a movement, has combined the relocalization of the agri-food system with a strengthening of food nationalism. Relocalization of tea production has promoted an ethos of food nationalism against tea from outside Taiwan, and while *bentu* has strengthened the development of local tea production by emphasizing concerns of environment and justice, it has also been a strong bordering force in redefining Taiwanese tea as a national symbol with a focus on tea – particularly fermented tea – produced inside Taiwan. However, the mobility of tea, including varieties and processing know-how, from Taiwan to other countries such as Vietnam, has complicated the *bentu* movement of tea through de-bordering forces which seek to compensate for the deficiency of local tea production inside Taiwan. As a result, bordering and de-bordering forces are not just about the national border of Taiwan, but also about people's everyday production and consumption of tea inside and outside Taiwan.

2.1 | Borderwork in everyday life

Neoliberal systems of governance, and more general processes of globalization, have failed to bequeath the “borderless” world they once promised. While consumer goods, capital, and the wealthy cross borders with relative ease, the poor are increasingly constrained by ever-expanding immigration rules, border walls, and surveillance infrastructure (Jones & Johnson, 2014). So-called globalization did not erase borders or boundaries, but enacted various divergent practices of bordering or boundary drawing (Newman, 2006). In their wake, scholarship on boundary studies has re-emerged with a renewed

approach that regards boundaries as a dynamic process of demarcating space, rather than a static and passive line (Newman, 2003). Likewise, while the on-the-ground boundary drawing has been the theme of geographical research, especially in political geography, geographers have also expanded the remit of boundary studies to consider processes of categorization (Jones, 2009, 2010), which includes the definition of the *bentu* as a category for agri-food production and consumption in Taiwan.

As Jones (2009, p. 184) argues, boundary studies should “[move] away from a singular focus on political borders and their related social boundaries to investigate the more general bounding processes involved in all types of categorization.” While practices of categorization indeed incorporate the bordering processes demarcating inclusion and exclusion, some worry that boundary studies could lose its focus on spatiality if all types of categorization are to be considered fair game (Schaffter et al., 2010). However, in recognizing categorization as a theme of boundary studies, Jones (2010, p. 266) argues that, “geographers should be emphasizing the spatiality of the boundary-making process and demonstrating that we have something meaningful to say about the various boundaries that metaphorically and physically shape the ways in which we understand the world around us.”

Jones and Johnson (2014) further encourage scholars of border studies to look beyond physical state borders and to re-orient our attention to the non-state actors that conduct borderwork at the scale of people's everyday lives. The relationship between boundary-drawing and state governance therefore avoids being “locked” into a discussion of those top-down bordering processes that exist on the physical margins of sovereign states. Rather, borderwork is practised and realized in people's everyday lives, even when these borders exist at a far physical remove from national boundaries. This does not mean that the actual site of a border becomes less significant. Rather, as the study of Vietnamese and Taiwanese tea below shows, this approach allows us to better understand the ways in which the power of exclusion and inclusion instituted at actual borderlines are diffused and exercised through the “vernacularization of borders” (Cooper et al., 2014).

This “vernacularization of borders” in border studies refers to the idea of shifting emphasis “away from the state as the primary borderer of choice,” and draws attention to “other, equally important, borders and actors doing their borderwork well away from territorial edges and peripheries” (Cooper et al., 2014, p. 28). This shifting away from the state also pushes border studies scholars to look into the non-state borderworkers, such as the tea itself and the tea merchants who engage in both bordering and de-bordering work for the tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan. As Cooper et al. (2014) argue, “taking into account non-state borderworkers doing their borderwork in non-traditional locations, different types of borders – state and non-state alike – can be conceptualized as engines or tissues of non-proximate connectivity, placing borders more centrally within wider processes of global connectivity.”

Taking vernacularization of borders as one approach to Taiwan's *bentu* agri-food production and consumption, of tea in particular, both tea and those involved in tea production are identifiable as non-state borderworkers. Specifically, the tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan has been a bordering and de-bordering process practised by the interaction between non-human (tea) and human (tea merchants) non-state borderworkers. Additionally, the negotiations regarding the border-crossing tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan, as well as the national protectionism of tea produced in Taiwan, have also placed a border between Vietnam and Taiwan within the wider processes of cross-regional connectivity of the tea trade. Meanwhile, the borderworks of both tea and tea merchants have taken place away from the physical borderlines, and are relocated in people's everyday practices of tea production and consumption, such as the plantation sites and the processing factories. These are the non-traditional locations where the bordering and de-bordering forces of the tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan are realized.

2.2 | Relocating bordering between localism and nationalism of food

Research on the “vernacularization of borders” has relocated state practices of bordering to people's everyday lives. Here, we report various kinds of borderwork produced through everyday practices of tea production and consumption in both Vietnam and Taiwan. Our observations concerning the *bentu* movement of tea have pushed us to reconsider the meanings and effects of borders and the bordering of the relationship between the localism of agri-food systems and the political border at the national scale. More specifically, the ongoing *bentu* social movement in Taiwan contains multi-scalar meanings. *Bentu* for local Taiwanese tea refers to tea produced in the county, township, or a specific mountain area inside Taiwan. For example, Alishan tea, a renowned high mountain tea, is the tea produced from the Alishan mountain area in Chiayi County. Red Oolong (*hong wulong*) is mainly produced in Luye Township in Taitung County. But *bentu* Taiwanese tea can also collectively refer to the tea produced inside Taiwan in general. In fact, the so-called *bentu* tea culture has been a symbol of Taiwan's national culture and a means by which to forge Taiwan's national identity.

This resonates with Feagan's (2007) argument regarding LFS, that the politics of food and agriculture at the local scale are implicated in the politics of boundary drawing. However, the LFS framework for boundary drawing does not thoroughly integrate food localism and food nationalism, as seen in Taiwan's *bentu* movement. Here, Laine's (2016) approach to the "multi-scalar production of borders" enables reconsideration of the boundary drawing of *bentu* Taiwanese tea. In the tea trade between Taiwan and Vietnam, the bordering and de-bordering process at the nation state scale has been materialized through the non-state borderwork of localizing Taiwanese tea at multiple scales. Laine's (2016, p. 467) approach to the multi-scalar construction of the nation state's border is "constantly negotiated and reconfigured by its actors at different levels." The localness of *bentu* Taiwanese tea carries multi-scalar meanings at township, county, mountain area, and national levels. Meanwhile, these multi-scalar meanings of localness have worked together to construct the authentic Taiwanese tea at the national scale to exclude contamination from outside the country. To analyze this process, we therefore highlight two dimensions, spatial and symbolic, to address the multi-scalar bordering and de-bordering work regarding the *bentu* movement of Taiwanese tea and the resulting controversy over Vietnamese tea.

For both symbolic and spatial border processes, we rely on the vernacularization of borders to relocate the border between Taiwan and Vietnam in people's everyday practices of tea production. Further, we consider people's everyday lives in the tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan as an arena into which actors from different places, encompassing both the human and the non-human, are drawn into encounters to do borderwork. Such everyday life encounters compel us to shift the focus of our research from the physical border between Vietnam and Taiwan to reconsider borderwork at multiple scales and places. We therefore treat everyday life contexts of tea production and consumption as material scenarios of bordering and de-bordering between Vietnam and Taiwan. It is in these scenarios that normative practices and discourses of state governance and sovereignty are reproduced, challenged, or reworked. In the following sections, after a brief discussion of our methods, we will proceed with a discussion based on our observations of two phases of tea production, *cultivation* and *processing*. These two procedures combine two themes important for our discussion: symbolic borders and spatial borders.

In considering symbolic bordering, we follow Jones' (2009) argument of categorization as a form of bordering force, and focus primarily on the images and rhetoric surrounding the distinction between Vietnamese and Taiwanese tea. Here we also borrow Laine's (2016, p. 469) framework to take the geographical borders both as physical manifestations of state power and as "symbolic and mental representations of statehood for citizen and non-citizen alike." Accordingly, we expand this framework to reconsider the symbolic border between *bentu* Taiwanese tea and non-*bentu* Vietnamese tea. As Laine (2016, pp. 469–470) argues, "borders themselves are no longer seen merely as territorial lines in the sand at a certain place in space but as symbols of the processes of social binding and exclusion that are both constructed or produced in society." The symbolic border between *bentu* Taiwanese and non-*bentu* Vietnamese teas has then become the discursive power reinforcing "the power of exclusion."

These discursive elements are invoked in everyday acts of categorizing that either ratify or challenge the borderwork of delimiting *bentu* Taiwanese tea. Our discussion of spatial borders focuses on customs and quarantine practices as paradoxical spaces for both bordering and de-bordering. Building from this, we inquire into how the materiality of tea has served as a mechanism to orient the everyday practices of tea production, which decide whether or not tea will successfully cross the border from Vietnam to Taiwan. Here we emphasise the implications that the materiality of tea and its attendant production practices have in people's everyday lived experience of the "vernacularization of borders." That is, everyday practices of tea production are sites that materialize the effects of borderwork at the seemingly faraway customs inspection offices. It is worth noting that while for analytic purposes we treat symbolic and spatial borders as separate dimensions, they in fact interface with each other to enable or disable the work of delimiting boundaries between Vietnamese and Taiwanese tea.

3 | METHODS

This paper is based on empirical data collected in Taiwan and Vietnam. We conducted fieldwork in Lam Dong Province, Vietnam (Figure 2), in July 2015, June to August 2016, and August 2017, interviewing individuals involved in the tea trade between Vietnam and Taiwan, primarily Taiwanese tea merchants. We also conducted participant observation to collect data concerning tea cultivation, processing, and management practices. In Taiwan, we have conducted interviews since summer 2015 with individuals involved in the tea trade between Taiwan and Vietnam and those promoting locally produced Taiwanese teas. In total, we have conducted thirty-nine interviews in Vietnam and Taiwan with informants including tea farmers, merchants, and technicians. Because the import of Vietnamese tea into Taiwan remains a highly controversial issue, all informants' names in this article are pseudonyms.

4 | CULTIVATION: PESTICIDE MANAGEMENT AND BORDER CROSSING

Taiwanese tea merchants started most of the tea plantations and factories in Vietnam's Lam Dong Province beginning in the 1990s. These have substantially transformed the agricultural landscape in Lam Dong by introducing from Taiwan both new varieties of tea and new forms of processing know-how. The application of Taiwanese production methods to varieties originally developed in Taiwan has led many Vietnam-based Taiwanese tea merchants to believe that what they are producing is properly “Taiwanese tea,” albeit grown and manufactured in Vietnam. However, importation of tea from outside Taiwan has triggered the anxiety of those who identify the borderline between foreign and *bentu* Taiwanese tea as the spatial boundary between Vietnam and Taiwan. A concern to protect *bentu* tea, and domestic agriculture in general, has encouraged a distinct demarcation that fixes the hard border between Vietnamese and Taiwanese teas and therefore shores up the ostensible pure authenticity of *bentu* produce. In the debates between these contending groups, concerns about pesticide residue and resulting food safety have become a crucial battleground.

Concerns about Vietnamese tea in contemporary Taiwanese mass media have commonly centred on fears of pesticide contamination, including potential Agent Orange residue. Many producers of *bentu* Taiwanese tea, including tea growers and merchants, claim that imported Vietnamese tea suffers from poor pesticide management and Agent Orange residue. For example, one TV news report made the following claim:

Recently, a graphic concerning Vietnamese tea has gone viral on the internet. The picture shows that the pesticide residue in Vietnamese tea is 27 times higher than the legal standard, and might contain Dioxin (Agent Orange). Yet, tea companies import thousands of tons of Vietnamese tea and this could result in health problems for Taiwanese people. (Lai, 2014)

In practice, those who produce tea in Lam Dong Province have taken action to guard against these negative discourses. The charge regarding the issue of Dioxin is countered by pointing out that it was not used in Lam Dong during the Vietnam War (Tea Research and Extension Station, 2008). However, claims of high pesticide residue have meant that pesticide management has become a critical task for Lam Dong tea producers to ensure they pass Taiwanese customs inspection.

According to official statistics for 2016 from Taiwan's Food and Drug Administration, about 2% of imported tea violates regulations regarding pesticide residue, compared with 3% of tea produced inside Taiwan (Food and Drug Administration, 2016). These statistics also indicate that of the tea violating these regulations, less than 2% was imported from Vietnam. (Taiwan imports tea from many other countries, including Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, etc.) Somewhat ironically, then, the violation rate of *bentu* Taiwanese tea was actually higher than that of imported tea, including tea from Vietnam, and *bentu* Taiwanese tea was not necessarily safer than Vietnamese tea in terms of pesticide residue. The reason for this is that, for Vietnamese tea producers, pesticide management has become a crucial everyday practice which is essential for passing the customs inspection, and thus for successful export of tea to Taiwan. In short, the dispute of pesticide residue has embodied the paradoxical nature of *bentu* that is symbolically distinguished but spatially blurred between Taiwan and Vietnam. Two facets of these everyday pesticide management practices are of interest: the variety of tea tree cultivated, and the risks associated with securing customs clearance.

4.1 | Variety of tea tree

Galt (2008) has raised the cautionary “pesticide paradox” and argued that the ecological character of different crops is what decides their associated pesticide practices. In other words, different regimes of pesticide usage are not distinguished by whether food is produced for export or for the domestic market. Rather, pesticide application and management practices are determined by the different varieties of tea tree grown. Taiwan's Tea Research and Extension Station, for example, has been a leading centre for the development of commercial applications of different varieties of tea tree with features such as increased pest resistance, greater yield, and better adaptation to different growing environments (Chen, 2008, pp. 21-25). In short, different varieties of tea tree have different characteristics that affect which and how much pesticide can be applied.

Amongst the Taiwanese tea trees introduced to Lam Dong, two varieties predominate: Chin-Shin Oolong (*qing xin wulong*, Chen, 2008, pp. 21-25) and TTES No.12 (*Tai cha shi'er hao*, Tsai & Jones, 2010; Chen, 2008, pp. 21-25). Chin-Shin Oolong was introduced to Lam Dong first in the early 1990s, due to its popularity amongst consumers and consequent high value in Taiwan. However, Chin-Shin Oolong is also infamous for its “delicacy” and higher susceptibility to pests and illness than some other varieties. As a result, the hardier TTES No. 12 subsequently became the most widely planted tea

variety in Lam Dong. TTES No. 12, first transplanted to Vietnam in 1994, is characterized as possessing, “early shoot emergence, very strong growth, high yield of 17 tones/ha (at eight years old), good resistance to pests, medium drought resistance, shrub stem form, slightly spread branches” (Ngoc, 2012, p. 252). According to Taiwan's Tea Research and Extension Station, TTES No. 12 has advantages of “high shoot density, strong growth, high yield, and a long harvest season.” (Chen, 2008, p. 21-25).

In general, compared to other varieties like Chin-Shin Oolong, growing TTES No. 12 reduces the risk of damage from pests such as tea stem borer. These characteristics help reduce the volume and frequency of pesticide application required for commercial plantings. As well as its superior resistance to pests, TTES No. 12's good yield and long harvesting season has also contributed to it becoming the most popular introduced tea variety grown in Vietnam for export to Taiwan. TTES No. 12, therefore, has been one of the keystones of the spatial border crossing of Taiwanese tea in Vietnam. Nevertheless, lower pesticide usage does not mean no pesticides at all. Pesticides are still required to sustain the tea plantations of Lam Dong. Under these circumstances, passing Taiwanese customs guidelines concerning pesticide residue has been a key condition determining the border crossings of TTES No. 12 tea from Vietnam to Taiwan.

4.2 | Customs clearance for pesticide inspection

Since the 1990s, the TTES No. 12 tea variety, together with the Taiwanese tea producers in Lam Dong, have successfully negotiated the border crossing from Taiwan to Vietnam to emerge as the primary constituent of the tea plantations of Lam Dong Province. Nonetheless, tea produced from TTES No. 12 plants must still make the return journey to reach Taiwan's market, which means that customs inspections have become a critical rite of passage determining whether or not this journey will be completed successfully. Customs statistics for 2016 indicate that less than 2% of imported Vietnamese tea violated the criteria concerning pesticide residue in random customs inspections (Tunding Branch et al., 2015). As noted above, protectionist discourses concerning the pesticide residue of Vietnamese tea have been influential in structuring the symbolic border between Vietnamese tea and *bentu* Taiwanese tea. Nevertheless, tea from Vietnam still crosses the spatial border at customs inspection sites as a result of the routine practices of pesticide management instituted by Lam Dong plantations.

In Lam Dong, Taiwanese tea entrepreneurs have adapted their pesticide management practices to suit the Vietnamese environment and the total area of their tea plantations, ensuring their route of border crossing is stable and favorable. Those arriving in Lam Dong to establish tea plantations in the 1990s were able to lease large areas of land from the Vietnamese government. The large size of these plantations, from 20 hectares to over 100 hectares, differentiated them from most Taiwanese tea plantations, which are usually much smaller, as is true of Taiwanese farms in general (Chen, 2007). This discrepancy in size resulted in different approaches to pesticide management in Lam Dong and Taiwan. Firstly, as most of our informants in Lam Dong noted, tea producers there have to constantly keep in mind the need to pass random customs inspections for pesticide residue. Local tea farmers in Taiwan do not face this issue. As a result, those producing tea in Lam Dong faced a “regulation risk” (Galt, 2008) in terms of the border regulations encountered at customs.

As indicated by one of our interviewees, a tea plantation owner of over one hundred hectares, most of the tea producers in Lam Dong were not able to risk an entire shipment of tea being returned from Taiwan to Vietnam due to a failed pesticide inspection test. For most, especially those with a large area of tea under cultivation, rejection at customs would mean a significant financial loss because of the large volume of each tea shipment. Many tea producers in Lam Dong claimed that such a financial loss could result in immediate bankruptcy. Therefore, most of the tea producers in Lam Dong had to be confident that their pesticide management was adequate, using the most up to date information and adhering to strict standards. They would sometimes mock the symbolic border drawn by *bentu* protectionists in Taiwan and their use of the pesticide residue issue to demonize tea from Vietnam. For example, they would say sarcastically that most of the tea growers in Taiwan just managed small-scale plots and cared little about pesticide usage because they need not fear customs inspections. Tea producers in Lam Dong would also highlight the risk that small plots like those in Taiwan faced contamination or pollution from pesticide usage on neighbouring plots.

In sum, tea growers in Lam Dong have focused their production practices on managing pesticide use so as to safeguard a successful border crossing at the spatial border constituted by customs inspections. Yet the voice and visibility of the symbolic border constituted via images and rhetoric spread by *bentu* activists, and through the mass media, remains ironically prevalent; it is still a powerful force that conditions the material border crossing of Vietnamese tea into Taiwan. The symbolic border created by the issue of pesticide residue, though based on a stereotype, has nonetheless reified the categorical border between “poisonous” Vietnamese tea and “harmless” *bentu* Taiwanese production. Accordingly, tea producers in Lam Dong have applied different strategies to boost their tea's capacity to cross this border. In what follows we will see

how processing techniques have been adapted to effect “quality control” to ensure that Vietnamese teas possess a similar look and taste to *bentu* Taiwanese tea, another crucial prerequisite for their border crossing.

5 | PROCESSING: QUALITY CONTROL AND BORDER CROSSING

Vietnamese plantations’ pesticide management has become a critical operation for ensuring their teas can cross the spatial border constituted by customs inspections. Challenging the symbolic border between Vietnamese and Taiwanese teas, however, has required challenging the discourse regarding the quality differences in teas from each country, including their appearance and taste. Protectionist discourses claim that tea from Vietnam possesses an inferior look and taste compared with Taiwanese tea. Their reference is to mainstream quality standards applied to Taiwanese tea, which hold that the brewed tea liquor should be clear (i.e., not cloudy) and its taste and fragrance should express the essence of a particular tea with any impurities eliminated.

To highlight the quality of *bentu* Taiwanese tea, many protectionists in Taiwan point to local processing techniques as the key differentiator from imported Vietnamese tea. Claims for the superiority of *bentu* Taiwanese tea over Vietnamese tea hinge on claims for the unique know-how that local tea manufacturers have developed based on the *terroir* (*fengtu*, the analogous term used in Taiwan) of Taiwan, encompassing the local history and transmitted manufacturing traditions, as well as the physical characteristics of local tea plantations. The “high quality” of such *bentu* Taiwanese tea is contrasted with the alleged inferiority of Vietnamese tea. Consequently, popular media representations and Taiwanese tea producers often use terms such as “poor quality control” (interviews on 2015/02/27, 2016/06/26, and 2016/06/27), “turbid tea liquor” (ETtoday, 2014/11/07), or “foul taste” (interviews on 2016/06/27, 2016/06/30a, and 2016/06/30b) to describe the overall quality of Vietnamese tea.

To combat such negative discourses about the quality of Vietnamese tea, tea manufacturers in Vietnam, especially Taiwanese entrepreneurs, have endeavoured to meet quality norms of *bentu* Taiwanese tea. Their overall goal here is to match the appearance and taste of *bentu* Taiwanese tea. According to our informants producing tea in Vietnam, tea merchants importing tea from Vietnam into Taiwan have requested that their tea possess a taste and appearance similar to *bentu* Taiwanese tea. Tea merchants, or middlemen from Taiwan, would then use this similarity strategically when negotiating the price. After struggling for years with quality control, tea manufacturers in Vietnam have gradually acquired the processing know-how required to control the taste and appearance of their tea, such that they now dispute the symbolic border between high quality *bentu* Taiwanese tea and the stated low quality of Vietnamese tea. This symbolic border based around tea quality has influenced the work of tea producers in Vietnam, and in Lam Dong Province in particular, to control the taste and appearance of their teas, to eliminate any hint of “Vietnamese flavour” and to penetrate the seemingly distinctive borders of Taiwan, Vietnam, and *bentu*.

5.1 | Eliminating “Vietnamese Flavour”

While tea producers in Vietnam now consider the symbolic border based on hierarchical quality between Vietnamese and *bentu* Taiwanese tea to be problematic, they have nevertheless acknowledged struggling for some time to control the material quality of their teas. As a tea processor who moved to Lam Dong from Taiwan around 10 years ago said, “[at the start] you could indeed taste an obvious ‘Vietnamese flavour’ (*yuenan wei*).” The use of “Vietnamese flavour” as a negative descriptor of tea quality had several connotations. One experienced Taiwanese tea processor who had abandoned his tea enterprise in Lam Dong reported that “[Vietnamese flavour] was manifest in the turbidity of the tea liquor. Even after applying all my skills, I just couldn’t improve it.” Or, as indicated by Ah-Hua, who has produced tea in Lam Dong since the 1980s, “[Vietnamese flavour] is just like the flavour of sweet potato leaf!” (sweet-potato leaf is a popular vegetable side dish in Taiwanese cuisine). Whether manifest as visual turbidity or as an odour, Vietnamese flavour apparently was a characteristic that disqualified Vietnamese teas from aspiring to the assumed high quality of *bentu* Taiwanese tea. Tea producers in Lam Dong, who exported most of their tea to Taiwan, have thus struggled over how to deal with the issue of “Vietnamese flavour.” Only by ridding their tea of this nebulous characteristic could they claim a match, or at least similarity, between their tea and those produced locally in Taiwan. Equally, only by eliminating Vietnamese flavour could they support their claim that their tea was also “Taiwanese tea,” and that it was possible for their produce to cross the spatial border.

The appearance of Vietnamese flavour in their teas puzzled the initial group of tea producers active in Lam Dong tea businesses since the 1980s. The confusion stemmed from how producing tea using introduced Taiwanese tea trees, and applying the full suite of manufacturing know-how from Taiwan, nonetheless failed to produce the same taste as locally

produced Taiwanese teas and to challenge the symbolic border. The puzzle over Vietnamese flavour compelled tea producers in Lam Dong to think beyond tea varieties and processing techniques. After years of trial and error, several tea producers in Lam Dong arrived at an alternative explanation: Vietnam's physical environment was the cause of Vietnamese flavour. Or rather, as one of our key informants Ah-Hua explained, Vietnamese flavour was the outcome of their failure to adapt processing practices to the Vietnamese environment. Quality control practices applied in Taiwan were not necessarily suitable for the physical conditions encountered in Lam Dong. As a result, Taiwanese tea producers in Lam Dong started to develop different processing know-how, improving their understanding of technical aspects such as withering time for fresh tea leaves and the drying temperature for making raw materials, in order to adapt processing techniques to the tea growing in the Vietnamese soil and weather. For tea producers in Lam Dong, developing manufacturing processes to eradicate the Vietnamese flavour has been crucial to secure their businesses with confidence, producing tea with a taste just like that of *bentu* Taiwanese tea. These practices have also problematized the symbolic border based on claims of inferior quality control in Lam Dong. In sum, the need to eliminate Vietnamese flavour and institute careful regimes of pesticide management has exerted a material influence over the everyday practices of tea producers in Lam Dong. Altering their tea cultivation and manufacturing processes allows them to challenge the seemingly fixed spatial border at customs and the symbolic border based on the discursive power of quality control.

6 | CONCLUSION

Based on the above stories regarding the symbolic and spatial borders between Vietnamese tea and *bentu* Taiwanese tea, and adopting the combined approach of food nationalism and border studies, it is also possible to reconsider the meaning, materiality, and practice of *terroir*. The *bentu* movement as a counter action against the globalization of the agri-food system has been strongly linked to the concept of *terroir* and with multiple ideas including Geographical Identification (GI), fair trade, and organic production. The concept of *terroir* and its associated practices have included the notion of “placing taste.” As Besky (2014, p. 85) argues, *terroir*, as the “taste of place,” is “a cultural, rather than a natural phenomenon.” Placing taste, thus, is a bordering process which creates a bounded space for food that constructs images of “authenticity” and “naturalness” for *terroir* products (Guy, 2011). Meanwhile, “placing” as a verb implies both to border and to territorialize within, and of, the nation state as a comestible symbol; this is shown by Guy (2003) in her research on Champagne as both a place and a wine, that also represents France as a nation state (see also Rosenberger, 2009; Takeda, 2008).

Tea has become the comestible symbol that represents Taiwan as a nation state. Taiwan has especially struggled over being recognized internationally as a nation state due to its complex political tension with China. Although this tension, and the difficulties surrounding the national identity of Taiwan, are not the focus of this paper, the struggles over the international recognition of Taiwan as a nation state independent from China have led to social anxieties regarding the construction of a purified *bentu* essence of Taiwan to differentiate it from China. These anxieties, then, have also been prevalent in the construction of Taiwan's *bentu* food and tea cultures. Since tea has served as an emblematic representation of Taiwan, the pursuance of *bentu* Taiwanese tea produced from its unique *terroir*, both spatially and symbolically, has been a defensive power against impurity, as attributed to imported Vietnamese tea. Imported Vietnamese tea, though produced with tea varieties and processing techniques derived from Taiwan, has been deemed unsafe and as potentially adulterating the authenticity of *bentu* Taiwanese tea.

Social anxieties regarding the safety of imported Vietnamese tea have led the Taiwanese government, in line with the emerging *bentu* food movement and *terroir* discourse, to launch a policy of GI that requires mandatory labelling of the point of origin of a tea, including that from Vietnam (Food and Drug Administration, 2014). In practice this has not eased food safety concerns, but the policy has paradoxically strengthened the imagined dichotomy between “safe” *bentu* Taiwanese tea and “unsafe” Vietnamese tea. Throughout the discussion above, from pesticide management to quality control, we have reconsidered the assumed oppositional relationship between Vietnamese tea and *bentu* Taiwanese tea. Based on our empirical data, we have also reconsidered the broader meanings and material effects of *bentu* food movements for constructing the *terroir* of Taiwanese tea. We highlighted how *bentu* food movements, with the construction of *terroir*, have driven bordering processes that have spatially fixed a territory defined as Taiwanese tea, as demonstrated in the practices and discourses surrounding *bentu* tea production in Taiwan. Nonetheless, this bordering force has been met by de-bordering counter-forces. In our analysis, tea tree varieties and pesticide management regimes have all contributed to de-bordering forces that de-territorialize the spatial boundary demarcating what constitutes the *bentu* production of Taiwanese tea. Thus, the flexible material properties of tea have enhanced its mobility as a non-human actor in border crossing movements from Vietnam to Taiwan.

The recent development of a *bentu* food movement of Taiwan, with its emphasis on *terroir* in opposition to globalization, has resonated with scholarship in critical food studies, where it concentrates more on bordering issues from the

perspective of the exclusive and inclusive powers established in local food systems (Feagan, 2007). Meanwhile, *bentu* has also pushed us to reconsider the association between local food systems and food nationalism. As such, we take border studies in political geography as an approach for reconsidering tea production in Taiwan and Vietnam. *Bentu*, with both symbolic and spatial bordering, has pushed us to understand the national border between Taiwan and Vietnam not just as “a line in the sand” (Newman, 2006). Instead, we place *bentu* as “the border in everyday life” (Jones & Johnson, 2014). Moreover, we argue that in addition to looking into how symbolic and spatial borders intersect in everyday contexts, or the contention between bordering and de-bordering forces, we should also concern ourselves with issues of mobility. The interactions between tea producers as human actors and tea itself as a non-human element have been mechanisms by which bordering and de-bordering processes are themselves made mobile.

Following Mark Salter (2013, p. 12), we see the cross-border circulation of commodities as “the management of mobility.” While *bentu* tea protectionists have drawn and re-drawn the symbolic and spatial borders to control the mobility of Vietnamese tea, tea producers in Vietnam, especially those in Lam Dong, have practised a variety of strategies to re-mobilize their tea to cross the border into Taiwan. In sum, borders and mobility are interfaced with each other (Richardson, 2013), and this is a critical point as we reconsider *bentu* food movements and the construction of *terroir* not just in Taiwan but worldwide. In practice, the “movement” of *bentu* food movements contains two connotations. First, this “movement” is a social movement of *bentu* protectionism seeking to forge a spatially fixed border around local food production for authenticating *terroir* products. Second, this movement constitutes a pattern of mobility of people, things, and ideas. It has occasioned de-bordering mechanisms that activate processes of territorialization, de-territorialization, and re-territorialization of the *bentu* attached to *terroir*. Both dimensions of movement have become intertwined due to the interface of borders and mobility inherent in different actors, both human and non-human—in our case both tea producers and tea trees. As a result, while the *bentu* food movement has endeavoured to seek a spatially fixed Taiwanese tea, with symbolically distinct categorization between Taiwanese and Vietnamese teas, in reality the mobility of tea trees and production strategies has, paradoxically, resulted in a spatially blurred *bentu* Taiwanese tea.

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