



**Peter C. Perdue**  
Yale University, USA  
[peter.c.perdue@yale.edu](mailto:peter.c.perdue@yale.edu)

### **Is Pu-er in Zomia?: Tea Cultivation and the State in China**

Tea connoisseurs consider Pu-er tea to be one of the highest quality teas that China produces today. The best Pu-er tea sells for thousands of dollars per cake. In the past, foreign visitors to the People's Republic of China, often received gifts of maotai, an expensive distilled sorghum liquor from Guizhou. Now, they might just as often receive gifts of Pu-er tea. Like most of the highest valued teas, Pu-er grows in mountainous country, in southern Yunnan near the borders with Burma, Laos and Vietnam. Other prime quality teas, like Lapsang Sucheng, Gaoshan, and Assam, also come from the hill country. These areas have prospered for centuries because of their export markets in this highland product. Unlike other hill crops – opium, for example – tea has not generated illegal markets, and it has been a source of revenue for local governments.

James Scott and Willem van Schendel have called attention to neglected zones that lie beyond and between state control. They call this region “Zomia”, and argue that scholars have neglected the special features of production and social life in these regions. They include Southwest China, Northeast India, and Northern Burma in this zone. Do the tea production zones fit the characteristics of Zomia described by Scott and van Schendel? They share much of the ecology of highland regions, and they were located on the administrative and economic boundaries of the empire. But their links to domestic and international markets, and the prosperity generated by tea as a luxury beverage, could have given them a very different character from border regions which lacked these opportunities. By examining the ecology of tea production and the historical geography of these regions, we may clarify what determines socio-economic life in the hills.