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# Bastard Spice or Champagne of Cinnamon? Conflicting Value Creations along Cinnamon Commodity Chains in Northern Vietnam

**Annuska Derks, Sarah Turner and Ngô Thúy Hạnh**

## ABSTRACT

In upland northern Vietnam ethnic minority farmers are cultivating what some global retailers refer to as the 'champagne of cinnamon'. However, a closer examination reveals that this spice is not 'true cinnamon' but cassia, with the exact species remaining uncertain. Drawing on commodity chain literature and debates over the creation of value and quality, the aims of this article are twofold. First, it investigates the making of 'Vietnamese cinnamon' as it moves from the hills of northern Vietnam to supermarket shelves in the global North, and the actors and livelihoods involved. Second, it explores how different actors define 'Vietnamese cinnamon' and infuse it with often-contradictory values. Based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork over a four-year period, the study finds that the state and cooperating non-government organizations tend to ignore ongoing taxonomic confusion while creating a geographical indicator to highlight the uniqueness of this commodity. Yet, concurrently, exporters and retailers in the global North focus on other distinctions as key marketing tools including remoteness, ethnicity, taste and health benefits. The article thus calls for an expanded analytical focus on competing value creation for agro-food products and on the impacts for commodity producers, in this case ethnic minority farmers in the global South.

## INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly obvious that the cultivation of numerous agro-products in the global South is intimately linked to consumer preferences in the

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global North. The real or assumed environmental, social and quality concerns of these consumers have led to a profusion of labelling, from organic and fair trade certifications to geographical indicators, in order to categorize particular products as distinct from or superior to others (Elias and Saussey, 2013; Goodman, 2004; Lyon, 2006; Taylor, 2005). Not surprisingly, the multiple steps and negotiations that take agro-food commodities from global South producers to global North consumers are not straightforward and are often contested (le Polain de Waroux and Lambin, 2013; West, 2010). Hence, a nuanced understanding of the interactions at each node for such commodity chains is important to interpret why products get labelled in specific ways, by whom and how this might impact producer livelihoods.

In this study, we examine the contested and confused processes of categorization and creation of value along specific agro-food commodity chains in northern upland Vietnam. We investigate the production of 'Vietnamese cinnamon' as it moves as powder, sticks or oil from the hills of northern Vietnam to supermarket shelves in the global North, and the actors and livelihoods involved. We also explore how different actors define 'Vietnamese cinnamon' and infuse it with often-contradictory values. Concurrently, we are concerned about the implications of these processes and practices for ethnic minority cultivators in upland Vietnam, a region being increasingly integrated into global production circuits of agro-food commodities such as coffee, cassava and black cardamom (Grant, 2014; To et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2015). Yet, relatively little is known about the inner workings of 'Vietnamese cinnamon' commodity chains and the means by which the socialist state, foreign institutions and global retailers shape their management and marketing.

The case of cinnamon (*quế* in Vietnamese) is particularly interesting because of the controversies surrounding the definitions of and qualities attached to this agro-food commodity. When one looks beyond the supermarket shelf, it emerges that a great deal of what is sold as cinnamon is not 'true' cinnamon at all, but cassia, also known as 'bastard cinnamon' (Chennault, 2006: 156; see also Haw, 2017; Senanayake and Wijesekera, 2004). Moreover, as cultivators in northern Vietnam insisted in interviews, even cassia is 'not just cassia'.[1] Yet, despite controversies regarding how to categorize the species grown in these uplands, state agencies, development organizations and local and overseas retailers seek to underscore the distinctiveness of this Vietnam-sourced commodity in a variety of ways; ways that we found are often conflicting.

With cinnamon and cassia often bundled together in global trade reports, Vietnam has become one of the key cinnamon/cassia producers in the global spice market in recent years, ranked third in 2017 with 16.5 per cent of

1. Interviews with cassia cultivators, Yên Bái, November 2014 and June 2017.

global cinnamon/cassia production (Piyasiri and Wijeratne, 2016).[2] With their strong, spicy-sweet smell and flavour, cinnamon and cassia have near universal appeal and are among the most ancient and most popular spices traded globally. Their distinctive fragrance and taste enrich dishes and drinks all over the world, while their reputed anti-bacterial and antioxidant qualities are sought after for a variety of beauty and pharmaceutical products (Wang et al., 2009). In Vietnam, cassia is commonly used in the soup broth of *phở*, but it is also boiled with water to clean Buddhist statues and incense pots in pagodas and altars at home.

To address our aim, we draw on commodity chain literatures focusing on systems of provision and tropical commodity chains and connect these to anthropological debates over the creation of value and quality. Drawing on an in-depth content analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, we then analyse the elusive taxonomies surrounding cinnamon/cassia to the best of our abilities given the ongoing confusion about the different categorizations used in the scientific literature and among our informants. Subsequently, we focus on the different nodes along the commodity chains that start from Yên Bái (the key cultivating province of cassia in Vietnam), and highlight the actors involved and their roles in generating different channels of value creation for this spice via competitive naming and marketing approaches. We reveal that the cassia commodity chains originating from upland Vietnam are steeped in uneven ethnic, gender and political power relations, and we question the relevance and impacts of government and non-governmental organization (NGO) plans to improve local minority livelihoods via different value creation and marketing strategies. As Paige West (2010, 2012) reveals regarding specialty coffee, we demonstrate that within a highly competitive global market, value does not so much stem from anything inherent in cinnamon or cassia, but rather from images of its authenticity, ethnic cultivators and social responsibility.

Our findings are based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork completed between 2014 and 2018. In Vietnam's primary cassia cultivating province Yên Bái, we completed fieldwork in the three main cultivation districts of Trấn Yên, Văn Chấn and Văn Yên (see Figure 2 below). We interviewed 32 cassia cinnamon cultivators, oil distillation factory managers and workers, and wholesalers, in addition to five government officials from local People's Committees, the provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), and a Land Registry Department. In Vietnam's capital city Hanoi, we conducted conversational interviews with 35 consumers and 35 wholesale and neighbourhood market stall operators. Additional information on Vietnam-sourced cassia was collected in interviews or from online

2. For FAO crop statistics, see also: www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QC (accessed 3 January 2020).

communications with a botanist, a spice export company manager, an NGO expert in spice commodity chains, and two agriculture academics in Hanoi. Continuing along the commodity chains as best we could, we surveyed 48 online stores reportedly selling Vietnam-sourced ‘cinnamon’ — 18 in the US, 15 in China, 10 in Europe and five in Canada. We also undertook 23 conversational interviews with cinnamon/cassia retailers outside Vietnam, including Asian locales such as Bangkok, Beijing, Hong Kong and Shanghai and, more globally, Auckland, Montréal, New York and Zurich.

## TROPICAL COMMODITY CHAINS AND THE CREATION OF VALUE

There exists a vast literature on commodity chains and related approaches that trace the processes, networks and values surrounding a commodity from production to final consumption (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986). Classical commodity chain studies tend to focus on the movement of a product along nodes in a commodity chain to reveal the unequal rewards from the activities involved (Bair, 2009; Bowen, 2010; Forster, 2006). This explains, in part, the appeal of commodity chain frameworks for scholars and practitioners interested in addressing inequalities and improving the position of specific countries or actors along such chains (Forster, 2006; Neimark et al., 2016).

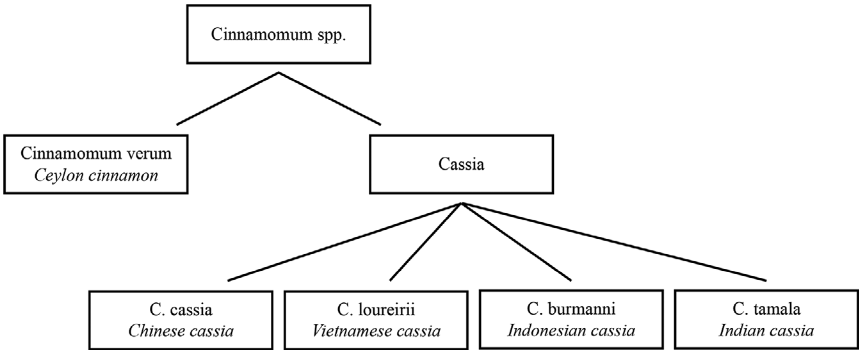
Nonetheless, conceptual approaches to commodity chains, such as global commodity chains (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994) and global value chains (Gereffi et al., 2005), have faced criticism for being too linear and deterministic (Bair, 2009; Forster, 2006) and for ignoring different representations and contestations of value along the chains (Hughes, 2001; Long and Villarreal, 1998). Moreover, they are critiqued for failing to consider the full complexity of factors such as gender, ethnicity and class that influence social relations at and between particular nodes (Leslie and Reimer, 1999). Despite such criticisms, we believe there is merit in drawing from the commodity chain literature, and in particular from a ‘systems of provision’ approach which seeks to overcome such criticisms by illuminating the interrelationships of material and cultural practices spanning the production, distribution and consumption of goods (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Narotzky, 2005). This approach emphasizes the movement of commodities — such as agro-food products — through space, the different roles and power relations of the actors involved, and the socio-economic and political implications of shifts in livelihood trajectories for cultivators at the starting nodes of commodity chains (Bush, 2004; Hughes, 2001; Leslie and Reimer, 1999).

Moreover, focusing specifically on tropical agro-commodity chains reveals the South to North flow of agricultural products that can only be cultivated for reasonable profit in specific tropical ecological niches, and ones that often have colonial roots. Studying tropical agro-commodity chains can thus reveal historical and ongoing structural inequalities. Such studies can also help to highlight the governance roles of a range of contemporary actors including state officials and NGOs (Gibbon, 2001; Talbot, 2002, 2009).

While tracing the commodity chains for cinnamon/cassia, we are particularly interested in the role different actors play in what Callon et al. (2002: 194) call the 'economy of qualities', or the strategies deployed by different actors to qualify goods. In the process, certain qualities are emphasized to position a commodity in relation to others, but these qualities are not necessarily fixed (ibid.). Commodities like cinnamon thus have careers (Appadurai, 1986) as they move, not just from a tree to a supermarket in the global North, but also, for example, from being considered a 'bastard spice' to a highly valued product. To trace these careers, we focus on what Forster (2006: 290) calls 'the construction of qualitative value — value produced in a system of differences'. Value thus emerges not only through the movement of commodities, but also within the social relations, material linkages and images that connect producers to consumers (Forster, 2006). As such, value is not just defined in economic and labour terms, following Karl Marx's 'law of value' (1867/1983), but also in terms of 'meaningful difference' in some larger system of categories (Graeber, 2001). This holds true for a commodity itself, and not only for its producers. Within the process of constructing value, producers are linked with trade managers, retailers and consumers as qualitative standards, tastes, preferences and images of authenticity are constantly created and negotiated (Forster, 2006). As Tsing (2013) argues, a central activity in the assessment of a commodity is the differentiation into value classes, each catering to specific markets. The point, she adds, is to create a 'proliferation of niches' (ibid.: 35). These niches in global commodity chains rely on diversity and thus incorporate factors that are normally 'banished from the economic' — such as culture, gender, ethnicity or, we would add, geography — as 'this is what makes them profitable' (Tsing, 2009: 158).

This creation of value through specific categorizations has become visible in the rapid growth of what Bidwell et al. (2018a) call ethical agro-food networks, such as fair trade, organics and geographical indications. Instead of undifferentiated mass products competing on price, certain products are being 'de-commodified', which entails efforts to (re)connect consumers with producers by making the social and ecological origins of the product visible, and/or by adding value through product differentiation on the basis of quality and identity (ibid.). Hence, 'decommodification' here refers not to pulling products out of their usual commodity sphere (Kopytoff, 1986: 74), but rather to a process in which non-economic factors are consciously drawn upon to increase value. Yet, as we will see in the case of Vietnamese cassia, these strategies of 'decommodification' are not necessarily consistent and at times are even contradictory, while not necessarily benefitting cultivators or producers at the start of commodity chains.

*Figure 1. Mapping Different Species of the Genus Cinnamomum Traded on the Global Spice Market*




*Source*: Authors' own compilation

## ELUSIVE TAXONOMIES

> 'It would not be an exaggeration to say that the cinnamon from Yen Bai province is coveted. Known as the "champagne of cinnamon", it has a high amount of essential oils, giving it a more intense flavor'.[3]

Sahale Snacks, a US-based nuts and dried fruit company, prides itself on thoughtfully sourcing its ingredients, including obtaining what it calls the 'champagne of cinnamon' from Yên Bái province. Indeed, the spice has, at least among some experts, become a highly esteemed variety because of its particularly strong, spicy, bittersweet taste (Madan and Kannan, 2004).

Obviously, such spice experts value Vietnamese 'cinnamon' for its inherent qualities. So, what is it that makes Vietnamese cinnamon, or rather cassia, so special and how is it distinguished from other cassia/cinnamon varieties? In an initial attempt to find answers, we completed a content analysis of botany reference materials, plant ecology studies and taxonomy databases. Cinnamon and cassia refer to spices processed from the dried bark of tropical evergreen trees (family *Lauraceae*, genus *Cinnamomum*), native to continental Asia and insular Southeast Asia (de Guzman and Siemonsma, 1999; Weiss, 1997). Although the genus *Cinnamomum* comprises between 150 and 250 tree species, only a few are exploited commercially (see Figure 1). The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) criteria distinguishes between cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum Blume* or ISO 6539), also known as *Cinnamomum verum* or Ceylon cinnamon, and cassia (ISO 6538). Cassia is divided into three main species: Chinese cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia* Nees ex Blume), Indonesian cassia (*Cinnamomum burmanni*

3. See: www.sahalesnacks.com/thoughtfully-sourced/articles/champagne-of-cinnamon (accessed 14 April 2018).

C.G. Nees), and Vietnamese cassia (*Cinnamomum loureirii* Nees). Other species also exist, such as Indian cassia (*Cinnamomum tamala*), which is considered inferior due to its lower oil content (Ravindran and Nirmal Babu, 2004). Notably, what consumers find on a global North supermarket shelf could belong to any of these species.

These categorizations of species and origins play a central role in determining quality and price. *Cinnamomum verum* or Ceylon cinnamon is often referred to as 'true cinnamon' and is the principal species found for sale in Europe and Latin America (Feldman and Bauer, 2008). Its bark and oil are considered to be of superior quality, especially when grown in Sri Lanka, where it is indigenous (Piyasiri and Wijeratne, 2016; Ravindran and Nirmal Babu, 2004; Senanayake and Wijesekera, 2004).[4] Consequently, the price of *Cinnamomum verum* can be up to ten times higher than any cassia species.[5] Meanwhile, the different cassia species are all subsumed under the term 'cassia', the variety most often sold in the US and Canada (Feldman and Bauer, 2008).

The most obvious differences between Ceylon cinnamon and any of the cassia species are the colour, taste and shape of the sticks. Ceylon cinnamon is lighter in colour, has a milder, sweeter taste, and the sticks consist of several thin layers of dried bark. In comparison, the different species of cassia are stronger and spicier in taste, with sticks comprising one thick layer of rolled bark. Moreover, Ceylon cinnamon and cassia vary in chemical composition: Ceylon cinnamon has a broader range of aromatic oils and lower levels of coumarin (ISO, 1997; Senanayake and Wijesekera, 2004; Wang et al., 2013). The latter is nowadays often seen as a reason for the inferior quality of cassia as opposed to Ceylon cinnamon, since coumarin can cause health problems when consumed regularly in high quantities. For example, the European Union has demarcated maximum levels for coumarin in ready-to-eat foods and recommends that consumers who eat large quantities of cinnamon opt for the low-coumarin Ceylon cinnamon instead of cassia (BfR, 2012; European Union, 2006). Likewise, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has issued a guidance note that distinguishes between Ceylon cinnamon and cassia on the basis of coumarin levels to prevent cassia being sold as cinnamon (FSSAI, 2017).

Nonetheless, the quality differences between cassia and Ceylon cinnamon remain contested. The Canadian-based South China Seas Trading Company, for example, highlights the particular fine and fragrant character of 'Saigon

4. For statistics on cinnamon in Europe, see CBI Market Intelligence product fact sheet: www.cbi.eu/sites/default/files/market_information/researches/product_factsheet_-_cinnamon_in_europe_2016.pdf (accessed 17 August 2018).
5. For cinnamon's export value worldwide, see: www.statista.com/statistics/593134/global-cinnamon-export-value-by-country/ and www.worldstopexports.com/cinnamon-exporters/ (accessed 14 April 2018).

cinnamon' and dismisses the idea of Ceylon cinnamon being superior to cassia, arguing that this suggests 'more about colonial politics than quality'.[6] Moreover, differences in smell, texture and quality are easily lost when these spices are ground into powder, a lack of distinction also exacerbated by the fact that the term cinnamon can officially refer to both cassia and Ceylon cinnamon in the US. In Europe, both cassia and cinnamon tend to be generically called *cannelle*, *canela*, *kaneel* or *zimt* (Feldman and Bauer, 2008; Ravindran and Nirmal Babu, 2004). As a result, most consumers in the global North remain unaware of any finer distinctions between these species.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), during the past three decades global production of cinnamon and cassia has more than quadrupled, from 5.4 billion tonnes in 1986 to 22.3 billion tonnes in 2016, resulting in a marked drop in price.[7] While Sri Lanka is still the main producer of Ceylon cinnamon, its share of world production of the combined species was reduced when Indonesia and China expanded cassia cultivation in the early 1980s. Vietnam became another important competitor on the global market after *Đổi Mới* (economic reforms) in the mid-1980s (Madan and Kannan, 2004). Cassia production in Vietnam increased from 3,200 metric tonnes in 1990 to over 35,000 metric tonnes in 2016, making Vietnam the third largest producer of cinnamon/cassia in the world.[8]

Vietnamese cassia, also confusingly known as *canella de Saigon*, Saigon cinnamon, or Saigon, Annam, or Tonkin cassia (Weiss, 1997), is commonly considered to be a species native to Vietnam. The botanical name, *Cinnamomum loureirii* Nees, is derived from the Portuguese Jesuit missionary and botanist, João de Loureiro, who first described the species when he stayed in Cochinchina (similar to today's southern Vietnam) in the 18th century (Nguyen, 2004; Weiss, 1997). While Vietnamese cassia is labelled as one of the cassia species on the global spice market, botanists increasingly question whether *Cinnamomum loureirii* is indeed a separate species. An ISO report (1997) on cassia correlates differences between cassia species not only to geographic origins but also to chemical composition, with Vietnamese cassia containing far more volatile oils than found in Chinese or Indonesian cassia. Yet, a field survey of cassia within Vietnam conducted by Ito et al. (2004) found differences in oil content and taste of cassia *between* trees in central and northern Vietnam. The authors argue that this could correspond to different species, with the central Vietnam trees being *C. loureirii* and the northern Vietnam trees being *C. cassia* (Chinese cassia). Nonetheless,

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6. For more information on certified organic, ground cinnamon, see: http://shop.southchinaseas.ca/Cinnamon-Ground-Saigon-Certified-Organic-40g_p_373.html (accessed 14 April 2018).
7. For FAO crop statistics, see: www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QC (accessed 3 January 2020).
8. See above FAO website for cassia production figures in Vietnam.

they conclude that further taxonomic tests need to be completed. In personal correspondence, Michiho Ito added that even with further tests, it would be extremely difficult to obtain clear-cut results, as characteristics of cinnamon trees change due to variable climatic and soil conditions, amongst other factors.[9]

Other authors cast further doubt on the existence of a specific Vietnamese cassia. Leela (2008) does not mention *C. loureirii* at all in his analysis of the chemistry of cinnamon and cassia, but notes that Chinese cassia is derived from China and Vietnam. Similarly, Ravindran and Nirmal Babu (2004: 1) argue that Chinese cassia is indigenous to China and Vietnam and state that *C. loureirii* is such a rare species that it 'cannot be the source of Vietnam cassia' (ibid.: 10). Nguyen Kim Dao (2004) argues that the classification of Vietnamese cassia as *C. loureirii* is a case of misrepresentation and 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 (2004: 158). He maintains that 'Vietnamese cassia' and 'Saigon cassia' are labels that have been introduced by the Vietnamese government without reference to regional origin, correct botanical source or official grade. Since there is no cassia grown in or around Saigon, a local official we interviewed suggested that the marketing label 'Saigon cinnamon' might just relate to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) being an export port, where intermediaries could label it 'Saigon cinnamon' regardless of origin.[10]

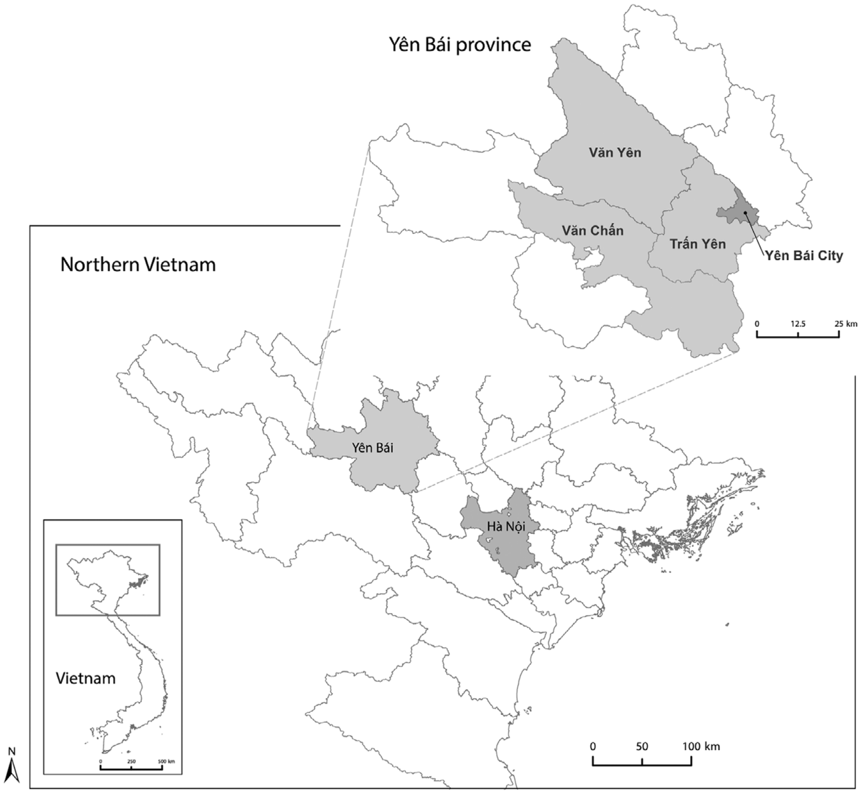
Hence, our taxonomic inquiry into the distinctiveness of Vietnamese cassia left us in a state of mild confusion. Spice retailers praise Vietnamese cassia as the best in the world and ISO labelling had us believing that Vietnamese cassia, or *C. loureirii*, exists as a separate Vietnamese-sourced cassia species. Yet, academic literature strongly doubts this, while some scientists are not convinced a firm conclusion can ever be reached. It therefore made sense to head to Vietnam and ask what farmers and intermediaries cultivating and trading cassia make of these claims. How do they categorize the products they grow and sell, and on what grounds? And how do these categorizations relate to different values?

## CASSIA COMMODITY CHAINS IN VIETNAM

The main provinces growing cassia in Vietnam are Yên Bái and Thanh Hóa in the north, and Quảng Nam in central Vietnam. Yên Bái province, located in the northern highlands, and our study site, is by far the most important cassia producing area in the country in terms of output, with cultivation

9. Email correspondence, Michiho Ito, 26 August 2017.
10. Interview, DARD official, Trấn Yên, 20 September 2017.

*Figure 2. Map of Yên Bái Province*




*Source*: Geographical Information Centre, McGill University, Canada

concentrated in three districts, Trấn Yên, Văn Chấn and Văn Yên (Ngoc, 2014) (see Figure 2).[11]

Having been cultivated for hundreds of years, Yên Bái cassia was offered to Chinese rulers who held northern Vietnam in a tributary relationship in feudal times (Nguyen, 2004). During the French colonial period (1887–1954), cassia was grown and exported from Annam, Cochinchina and Tonkin, the three regions that roughly make up present-day Vietnam (Gouvernement Général de l'Indo-Chine, 1901; Miller, 1947). In interviews farmers noted that soon after the country's independence, during the *Bao Cấp* (subsidy) era, only forestry officials were permitted to grow and trade cassia. As one ethnic minority Yao (Dao) farmer explained: 'Before, only foresters had the right

11. Interview, DARD official, Trấn Yên, 22 November 2014.

to grow or transfer cinnamon[12] because cinnamon cultivation was banned, like opium is now'.[13] After *Đổi Mới* economic reforms in the mid-1980s, the 1991 Law on Forest Protection and Development and the revised Land Law of 1993 provided for limited use rights over allocated plots of forest via 50-year land-use certificates (commonly known as Red Book Certificates) provided to individuals, groups of households, state forest enterprises and other state organizations (Pettenella, 2001). This allowed farmers to expand their cassia plots, and by the mid-1990s there was an open market for cassia bark and oil, with specialized traders becoming involved, and local authorities encouraging investment. Since 2000, the numbers of farmers in the province cultivating cassia has risen steadily.[14]

The expansion of cassia cultivation was also encouraged due to a shift in the state's forest policy agenda in the 1990s from forest exploitation to reforestation. The Vietnamese government initiated several programmes to re-green 'bare hills', halt swidden agriculture and reduce poverty, involving subsidies for tree seedlings and payments for households to plant trees (including those that would later be felled) (McElwee, 2016). In Yên Bái, many farmers told us that they started re-greening their hills with cassia during this period. While some were initially given seedlings by the local government for other trees, such as pine or Bodhi (*ficus religiosa*), farmers noted that these 'only make green and have little economic value'.[15] They soon found the results were very different for cassia.

By 2016, the area of Yên Bái under cassia cultivation had grown to 56,500 hectares and the provincial People's Committee is striving to increase the total production area to 76,000 hectares by 2020 (UBND Yên Bái, 2016). Most of these trees are in Văn Yên District, now known as the 'Kingdom of Cinnamon' (Ngoc, 2014; UBND Yên Bái, 2016). In order to analyse how the commodity chains of cassia link local producers to the global market within this environmental governance regime, and to better understand the degree to which different actors are investing in the naming debate, we take a closer look at the different nodes along the cassia chains originating in this province.

**Starting in the Nurseries**

The cassia commodity chains begin at seedling nurseries located in Yên Bái province's three main cassia growing districts. Mr Tuãn[16] is a nursery

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12. Local informants predominantly used *quế* (cinnamon in Vietnamese) in interviews, and in quotes we translate this broadly to 'cinnamon'.
13. Interview, elderly farmer, Trấn Yên, 22 November 2014.
14. Interviews, local official, Trấn Yên, 22 November 2014; farmer, Văn Chấn, 17 June 2017.
15. Interview, farmer, Văn Chấn, 17 June 2017.
16. We use pseudonyms to protect informants' identities.

operator who maintains four nurseries, each averaging 2 million seedlings. He explained that his original seeds are purchased from farmers for VND 280,000 (US$ 12) per kilogramme (in 2017). He then raises the seedlings before they are sold and transplanted to farmers' plots after nine months.[17]

However, farmers do not always trust seedlings sourced from such nursery operators. One Yao farmer remarked that nursery operators sometimes mix 'Chinese and Vietnamese varieties', hence one might end up with 'an inferior Chinese type'.[18] He therefore prefers to raise his own seedlings from the seeds of mature trees. When asked about different possible varieties, Mr Tuãn lamented that with the rapid rise in cassia cultivation since the 1990s, Chinese seeds are increasingly being imported because they are much cheaper than Vietnamese seeds. He detailed that there are two types of cassia grown in Yên Bái, one being local *Cinnamomum cassia*, which he insisted originated from Yên Bái Province and which he raised, and the other being *Cinnamomum cassia* China, or *quế Tầu* (Chinese 'cinnamon'). As outlined above, *Cinnamomum cassia* is known in academic circles as 'Chinese cassia', hence this distinction on the ground between local *Cinnamomum cassia* and Chinese *Cinnamomum cassia* raised additional questions, which we address later in the article.

**Cassia Cultivators**

Most cassia cultivators in the province are ethnic minority Yao and Tày, with fewer Hmong, Mường and ethnic majority Kinh. Across ethnicities, the farmers we interviewed maintain a composite approach to their livelihoods, commonly growing rice for their own consumption and cultivating a range of cash crops. These ranged from mulberry leaves (for raising silkworms), bamboo, corn and tea, to breeding pigs and chickens. However, among the different cash crop options, only cassia — as one commune chairman formulated it — 'makes rich' ('*quế làm giàu*'). To illustrate his point, he asked if we had seen the newly built and renovated houses in his village, constructed with 'cinnamon money'.[19]

Farmers usually plant 10,000 cassia seedlings per hectare, placing them one metre apart on hill slopes and initially intercropped with cassava to provide the precious seedlings with shade and to slow the growth of weeds. After about three years, the trees are thinned to 6,000 per hectare, with those removed sold for their bark, leaves and timber. The remaining trees grow another 8–10 years, depending on local conditions and farmers' cash needs. During this time, trees are pruned bi-annually, with the trimmed leaves and branches collected for sale. Finally, the trees are felled, the bark is peeled,

17. Interview, nursery operator, Trấn Yên, 6 June 2017.
18. Interview, farmer, Văn Chấn, 17 June 2017.
19. Interview, local official, Văn Chấn, 17 June 2017.

and the timber, leaves and small branches are sold. Labourers are often hired for these processes and paid in terms of the quantity of leaves or small branches collected, or bark peeled. The bark is then dried in the sun for two days if weather conditions are hot and dry. Alternatively, farmers or traders dry cassia over a fire on a grill and sometimes sprinkle it with sulphur, which is considered to make the cassia look more attractive and prevent mould.

As all the farmers we interviewed emphasized, a key benefit of growing cassia trees is that 'we can sell everything': the leaves and small branches are used to make oil or incense, while the felled timber is used for construction.[20] Most valuable, of course, is the bark, and the thicker the bark the higher the grade and price (outlined below). For most farmers we talked to, these different grades of bark were the most relevant categorizations of cassia, while other distinctions, such as species, seemed to be irrelevant or just confusing.

**Local Trade Intermediaries**

In the three districts of Yên Bái Province with the most cassia growers, farmers and local trade intermediaries have developed trust-based working relationships and social capital over time. Farmers thus tend to sell their cassia leaves, branches and bark to a trader they have known for years. In turn, such relationships allow farmers to ask for cash advances for their main cassia bark harvests if needed. One cassia trader explained:

> If the farmers want to borrow five to ten million *dong* [US$ 220–440] we lend it to them first and when the harvest comes, we get their payment back as cassia. They trust us and will not sell cassia to others with a bit more profit as they can't borrow money from them when they need it. This way, we keep the relationship.[21]

These local trade intermediaries, and wholesalers and officials, agreed that the pricing for Yên Bái dried cassia bark is categorized from A to D according to a range of measures (see Table 1). The only species knowledge these individuals displayed was to equate Grade A with 'local cassia' or 'Vietnam cassia', which is typically exported to Western countries. Grade B (which could be a mix of local and so-called Chinese cassia) heads to some Western and Asian outlets, while Grade C cassia is sold more specifically to Bangladesh, India and China and Grade D is most frequently traded to China for further processing. Local trade intermediaries noted that while trading high quality Grade A bark brings greater profits, it also entails higher risks as exporters and overseas importers have very precise expectations. Lower grade bark is considered a low-risk option for these local traders, but it provides less profit.[22]

20. Interviews, farmers, Yên Bái, June 2017.
21. Interview, local trader, Trấn Yên, 15 June 2017.
22. Interviews, local traders, Yên Bái, 2014 and 2017.

*Table 1. Grading Criteria for Cassia Harvested in Yên Bái Province*

| **Grades** | **Criteria** | **Prices traders paid farmers, 2016–2017** |
|---|---|---|
| Grade A | Top quality. Only local cassia (not Chinese). Bark 7mm thick or more; trees need to be over 10 years old. | Range from 30,000 VND to 36,000 VND/kg |
| *for Grades B1 to D* | *local or Chinese cassia — traders do not seem to mind; whole sticks, broken or split* | |
| Grade B1 | 5-7 mm bark | 30,000 VND/kg |
| Grade B2 | 3-5 mm bark | 19,000 VND/kg |
| Grade C1 | 2.5-3 mm bark | 16,500-18,000 VND/kg |
| Grades C2–C4 | 1-2.5 mm bark | ≤16,000 VND/kg |
| Grade C5 | 1 mm bark or less | ≤16,000 VND/kg |
| Grade D | poor quality, mouldy, irregular, etc. | ≤16,000 VND/kg |

*Source*: Based on interviews conducted by authors in 2014 and 2017

Local trade intermediaries sort and process the cassia bark depending on exporters' requests. A few large-scale traders in Yên Bái Province export directly to overseas customers, but most go through spice wholesale exporters located in other provinces, such as Bắc Ninh or Hanoi. For example, a trader selling to clients in India 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'.[23] Large-scale traders also talked of overseas importers visiting from South Korea, Japan and the US who not only visit to negotiate prices and quality, but meet farmers and climb cinnamon hills to inspect trees. Such interactions allow local traders and state officials to voice a specific story behind the spice they market, a point to which we return shortly.

**Large-scale Oil Refiners**

From local trade intermediaries, the cassia passes along one of two separate commodity chains: one for dried cassia sticks or powder, and the other for bark, twigs and leaves to be processed into cassia oil.[24] Before 2014, there were no large-scale distilleries for cassia oil in Yên Bái Province and only a small number of farmers distilled the oil themselves. Since then, the oil has grown in importance as a prized commodity, and it is sold predominantly to China. By 2018 there were four large factories and several smaller ones distilling cassia oil in the province. The end product is not true essential oil, being refined to an oil/water mixture containing about 60 per cent oil. One factory manager explained that this was not important, given the high

23. Interview, local trader, Trấn Yên, 23 November 2014.
24. This follows a fairly simple distillation process involving large vats that are filled with tree branches, twigs, leaves and water, and placed over wood fires.

demand for their product from exporters in Lào Cai and Lạng Sơn provinces (both bordering China) and in Hanoi.[25]

**Wholesalers and Exporters**

Having passed through the hands of local trade intermediaries, a relatively small proportion of Yên Bái cassia ends up at Hanoi's main dried foods wholesale market, Đồng Xuân. From here, cassia is sold to vendors at smaller markets in Hanoi and to wholesalers elsewhere in the country. Cassia destined for the domestic market is, as a local cassia expert noted, often 'bad quality with low price; the good quality cinnamon can't be sold to Vietnamese people as we can't afford to buy it'.[26] Price distinctions continue to be based on the different grades and forms — rather than species — of cassia, with peeled sticks marketed as more expensive export quality 'cinnamon' ('*quế xuất khẩu*') than rough, unpeeled sticks and broken cassia. Đồng Xuân traders know that cassia is grown somewhere in mountain forests (*núi rừng*), but they are often unsure where — in interviews only a few mentioned Yên Bái Province as the source of the best quality cassia.[27]

The vast majority of cassia is destined for overseas export, mainly to China, but also to India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the US. As with farmers and local traders, most wholesalers distinguish between different cassia grades and forms (whole, sticks, split, broken or powder), and sometimes organic and non-organic produce, without specifying the species beyond Grade A and B distinctions. Higher quality cassia tends to transit through the regional wholesale hub of Singapore, where it is processed further, re-packaged and branded before being transported to international buyers. Indeed, Singapore accounts for 50 per cent of the re-exports of Southeast Asian-sourced cassia for the world market (Madan and Kannan, 2004).

What was particularly notable during fieldwork was how farmers, local trade intermediaries, wholesalers and exporters, and district and provincial officials constantly stressed that Yên Bái cassia is 'Vietnamese cinnamon' of superior taste and quality. This was also the case in newspaper reports and marketing schemes on Yên Bái Province's cassia website.[28] Considering the controversies regarding the qualitative differences between cinnamon versus cassia, the (possible) taxonomical differences between Chinese and Vietnamese cassia, and the confusion over what is actually grown in Yên Bái, we decided to delve further into the creation of distinctiveness along the cassia chain.

25. Interview, factory manager, Trấn Yên, 23 November 2014.
26. Interview, DARD official, Trấn Yên, 22 November 2014.
27. Interviews, market traders, Hanoi, 9 July 2018.
28. For more information on the cassia website for Yên Bái Province, see: www.quevanyen.com (accessed 17 January 2020).

## THE INVENTION OF VIETNAMESE CINNAMON

A large percentage of cassia grown in Vietnam is exported to China, where — regardless of its grading — it gets mixed with cassia grown there, before being re-exported 'without mentioning the source of cinnamon'.[29] Moreover, when Vietnam-grown cassia reaches the regional wholesale hub of Singapore it may also be mixed and blended with cassia purchased from other regional exporters, such as Indonesia, before being re-exported as just plain 'cinnamon' (Madan and Kannan, 2004: 298). This merging across grades and source locations and indistinctiveness is comparable to Tsing's (2013: 35) findings regarding how *matsutake* mushrooms lose any specific regional information regarding their place of origin when imported from Yunnan to Japan, as the privilege of regional labelling is 'reserved for Japan-grown food'. Yet, it stands in contrast to initiatives by the Vietnamese state to add value for cassia grown within its borders.

### Creating a 'Geographical Indication'

Mr Anh, a Mường farmer who trades in cassia, was very clear about the superior qualities of Vietnamese cassia. Much like Mr Tuãn quoted above, Mr Anh made a distinction between *quế Tầu* ('Chinese cinnamon') and *quế bản địa* ('local cinnamon'). He explained that in the past, many farmers grew 'Chinese cinnamon', but now almost all grow the local variety, because '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'.[30]

Obviously, these distinctions between cassia varieties go beyond the standard scientific categorizations listed in Figure 1. There is now a clear shift in Yên Bái Province towards favouring the cultivation of 'local cassia'. This is not just a result of individual farmers' experiences and initiatives; it has been actively promoted by the Vietnamese government and international development organizations. One important player has been a Dutch development organization that worked with local Vietnamese government officials to promote 'local cassia'. This three-year project supplied farmers with subsidized 'local cassia' seedlings, introduced drying ovens and created different marketing schemes.

Although this project placed a lot of emphasis on cultivating 'local cassia', when asked for details, a former project advisor of the Dutch development organization tasked with quality control and organic certification of 'local Yên Bái cassia' admitted that there was no scientific evidence to confirm the differences between these types of trees. He added that there had, in fact,

29. Interview, local trader, Trấn Yên, 27 November 2014.
30. Interview, local trader and cassia farmer, Trấn Yên, 17 June 2017.

been a lot of intermixing between varieties from within Vietnam and across the border with China. Yet, despite these unclear categories, the project on which he was employed encouraged local farmers to plant 'local cassia' 'to maintain good quality and preserve its originality for traceability'.[31]

The reason for this focus on a local variety becomes clear when one delves into Vietnam's geographical indicator (GI) certification system. A GI is supposed to convey 'the geographical origin, as well as the cultural and historical identity, of an agricultural product' (Bowen, 2010: 210). GIs are increasingly hailed as a promising tool for socio-economic development in the global South, because of their potential to improve farmers' profits in extra-local markets by creating associations between quality, place and taste (Bowen, 2010; Pick et al., 2017; UNCTAD, 2015). This has not been lost on Vietnamese officials. Pick et al. (2017: 306) note that 'the Vietnamese legal framework for the protection of GIs provides for a State-driven, top-down management of GIs that is supported by strong public policies'. Hence, Văn Yên District's People's Committee, with the support of Agence Française de Développement and the FAO, registered Văn Yên cinnamon as a GI product in 2010 (FAO, 2016; Pick et al., 2017). The Vice-Chairman of Văn Yên's People's Committee stated that this GI has helped to 'increase the value of the local specialty' and maintain and conserve 'genetic resources and strengthen the promotion of Văn Yên cinnamon products to domestic and international markets in a sustainable manner' (quoted in Nguyen, 2014: online).[32]

Despite the fanfare around GIs, farmers whom we interviewed had mixed reactions. In Văn Yên district, the GI initially covered about 20,000 hectares in eight communes (out of the district's total 27 communes) (Cục Sở Hữu Trí Tuệ, 2010; Nguyen, 2014). This resulted in Mr Cuòng, a farmer from another commune in Văn Yên district, complaining that it covered too small an area. Mr Cuòng reasoned that if he used seedlings *grown* in Văn Yên district, then his cinnamon — planted in a different district — should belong to the GI too, and he would label his cinnamon as such, clearly contravening the logics behind the GI.[33] Moreover, the vast majority of farmers and small-scale trader intermediaries with whom we spoke knew nothing of this quality marker. They also seemed uninterested in learning more, being content with their current quality measures and trade relations. This begs the question as to how this GI will improve local livelihoods.

Another cause for questioning the use of a GI approach for marketing Yên Bái cassia is the comparative lack of success with a GI label for star anise

31. Email correspondence, former project advisor, 3 October 2017.
32. Văn Yên sourced cassia is not the only cassia with a GI in Vietnam. In 2011, Trà My cassia (Quảng Nam Province, central Vietnam) was registered as a GI, and Thường Xuân cassia (Thanh Hóa Province, north coast region) was in the process of being registered as of 2017 (Pick et al., 2017).
33. Interview, farmer, Văn Yên district, June 2017.

in another northern upland province, Lạng Sơn, since 2007. There, most farmers we interviewed in 2017 also knew little about a GI introduced for star anise (Turner et al., 2019). In addition, a number of overseas star anise traders buying from local export companies preferred not to use the GI label, because they wanted to alter or hide its origins (see also Pick et al., 2017). The same seems to be true for the GI of Văn Yên cassia, with this locale not appearing on the websites of any major cassia export companies operating in Vietnam.[34] It thus remains questionable to what extent these GI initiatives, driven by outside actors like development agencies and the state, actually contribute to creating a stronger position for Vietnamese spice producers on the international market. One foreign spice trader even bluntly noted:

> 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 NGO 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.[35]

This is perhaps an overly cynical review of NGO projects in the province, since the farmers we interviewed did appreciate other features these organizations had introduced, such as cassia-drying ovens. Moreover, as the examples of Mr Anh and Mr Cuòng show, cultivators of cassia are not merely 'passive subjects of discourses', but also 'adopt and adapt these discourses ... by laying claim to greater decrees of authenticity or higher ecological standards' (Bidwell et al., 2018b: 7). Still, to date, it seems that a GI for marketing Yên Bái cassia has not been as successful as appeals to images of historicized and ethicized places and producers have been.

## The Making of a Speciality Product

The core idea behind a GI is that consumers assign value to products based on geographic origins. One reason why this does not always work well in practice may be, as Hull (2016) suggests, that consumers often care more about the image or brand, rather than the precise source location. This becomes obvious when analysing how Vietnamese cassia is marketed. For example, the French spice company Ducros promotes 'cannelle de saïgon' as a rare and strongly flavoured spice that originates from the 'province of Saigon in Vietnam',[36] notwithstanding the fact that there is neither a province named Saigon (the city and its surrounding province were renamed Ho-Chi-Minh City in 1976) nor is cassia grown in that region. Equally confusing

34. See, for example, Hanfimex: www.hanfimex.com/products/cinnamon-cassia/5/; or Pacific Basin Partnership: http://pbpspice.com.
35. Email correspondence, foreign spice trader, 25 March 2018.
36. See: www.ducros.fr/produits/produits-stars/premium/cannelle-saigon-moulue-premium (accessed 6 May 2019).

is the way Sahale Snacks, the US company that hails 'cinnamon' from Yên Bái as the 'champagne of cinnamon', describes the origins of its 'carefully sourced' spice. The company website notes that 'unexploded bombs lie on the same land where cinnamon forests like to grow' and that the 'good news is that . . . a Seattle-based humanitarian organization [is] working in central Vietnam to help clear the farmlands'.[37] Although Yên Bái is not actually in central Vietnam, and it is unlikely that many bombs fell on the areas where cinnamon grows, this description of Yên Bái as a war-torn place seeks to emphasize the remoteness, inaccessibility and therefore distinctiveness of the locale and its products. Similarly, the CEO of another large US-based organic produce wholesaler, speaks of Vietnam's major cinnamon growing region as being 'almost to the end of the world, literally' in a promotional video that shows how his company helps children attend school in this remote region. In the opening shot, viewers are told they can 'make a difference with Vietnamese cinnamon' that is back on the international market again after an absence of 'more than 20 years due to the Vietnam War'.[38]

These global retailers use particular, at times rather implausible, imaginings of place, alluding to colonial times, the Vietnam War, and remote locales, to market Vietnamese-sourced cassia. An emphasis on the distinctiveness of the spice is similarly made through a focus on its cultivators. This is particularly noticeable when Vietnamese state news outlets report on cassia production. Stories about Yên Bái cassia on the websites of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Voice of Vietnam, and other official Vietnamese news outlets consistently feature pictures of minority cassia farmers in colourful ethnic attire (*Dang Cong San*, 2016; Thua, 2016). These pictures typically portray Yao women at work, as if the cultivation and processing of cassia were in their hands alone, which it is not, while neither Yao men nor women wear their best clothes to toil in their cassia fields.

This link between cassia, gender and ethnicity is also emphasized by local authorities and is highlighted in the promotional videos of development agencies and export companies, and during a recently introduced annual Văn Yên cinnamon fair. All seek to emphasize the long-standing traditions and local indigenous knowledge behind growing cassia, and the specific relations between cassia and gender due to the role of the spice in specific marriage and inheritance practices of the Yao. According to Yao custom, women are given cassia land upon marriage as part of their dowry (*của hồi môn*), while children are considered to own any cassia trees they plant and take care of by themselves (see Nguyen, 2016). However, the Yao farmers we talked to did not find this particularly noteworthy. They explained that their children, both boys and girls, help their parents to grow cassia and will all inherit part of the land. The fascination with the connection between

37. See: www.sahalesnacks.com/thoughtfully-sourced/articles/champagne-of-cinnamon (accessed 14 April 2018).
38. See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eqa80sw7teY (accessed 14 April 2018).

Yao culture and cassia therefore probably says more about majority Kinh perspectives on gender, ethnicity and inheritance, and their exoticization of 'the other' (World Bank, 2009). Such exoticization is strategically employed to create an image of Văn Yên cassia as an authentic, indigenous specialty product — although this obviously only pertains to the very start of the cassia chains, as those who trade, promote, or develop policies regarding the province's cassia are predominantly part of the Kinh majority. Therefore the question remains whether these strategies benefit cassia cultivators at all or rather more powerful market players (Bidwell et al., 2018a).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

> 'Whenever there are discontinuities in the knowledge that accompanies the movement of commodities, problems involving authenticity and expertise enter the picture' (Appadurai, 1986: 44).

Our analysis has shown that very different actors have concurrently fashioned both the 'champagne of cinnamon' and a bastard spice from Vietnam-sourced cassia, highlighting new insights with regards to the complexity of value creation along agro-food commodity chains. When Vietnamese cassia (re-)entered the global market in the 1990s, growers and exporters had to find a place for their product alongside highly prized Ceylon cinnamon and cheaper, mass-produced Chinese and Indonesian cassia varieties. Within this extremely competitive global market for cinnamon/cassia, underscoring distinctiveness became a central element in the creation of value. This resonates with Anna Tsing's (2013) work on the *matsutake* mushroom in which she argues that value is created through the process of distinguishing between different value categories. The value classes of these mushrooms are based mainly on size and weight, while consumers seem uninterested in the socio-political conditions of the producers and their lifeworlds.

In contrast, categorizing Vietnam-sourced cassia appears more complex, based — depending on who creates the value — on diffuse notions of taxonomies, geographies, gender and ethnicity. By critically engaging a systems approach to commodity chain analysis and illuminating the interrelationships of material and cultural practices spanning the production, distribution and consumption of Vietnam-grown cassia we could reveal such complexities. We have found that the classifications of cassia grown in northern Vietnam are highly fluid, contested, and variously (ir)relevant across different groups of actors and spatial scales. First, Vietnamese cassia (particularly Yên Bái cassia) is actively created as a specific commodity by the provincial government and international NGOs, who draw on its place of origin and create a GI in order to set it apart from the Chinese variety. Second, some exporters and retailers in the global North work to develop new niches by focusing on images of a remote, war-torn locale, and the gendered and ethicized status of cinnamon's cultivators. Moreover, they dwell on the refined taste of consumers and their environmental and social concerns to market Vietnamese 'cinnamon' as a speciality product. Third, the distinctiveness of Yên Bái-sourced cassia, or even Vietnam-sourced cassia, is ignored or subjected to the politics of devaluation (Bair and Werner, 2011) by many traders and importers from other regional countries, especially China, and even denied by some botanists who openly question the existence of a distinct Vietnam-sourced cassia.

These different, even competing, categorizations of Vietnam-sourced cassia raise questions about the significance of strategies of commodification and decommodification in the creation of value of agro-products from the global South. So far, ethnic minority cassia farmers seem to be doing relatively well compared to other ethnic minority farmers in the region due to the rising global demand for cassia. These profits are largely based on selling an undifferentiated product to China. Nonetheless, given this dependency on the global cinnamon/cassia market in which China and Indonesia are the main players (Piyasiri and Wijeratne, 2016), profits may quickly decline if these competitors increase their output.

The different 'strategies of decommodification' that seek to differentiate and add value to a product like cassia, based upon its quality, geography or identity, aim to protect producers from such price volatility (Bidwell et al., 2018a). As we have shown, the creation of a speciality product does not so much stem from anything inherent to cassia from Vietnam, but rather from a 'fetishization of the land and people who live there' (Hull, 2016: 126). The Vietnamese government, along with several international development agencies, seeks to create a niche market for Vietnam-sourced cassia through geographic labelling, while global retailers attempt to add value through their own campaigns focusing on an 'authentic' ethnic product, emphasizing its remoteness and distinctiveness. Yet, while seeking to create commodity value through tapping and transforming such non-capitalist social (and spatial) relations (Tsing, 2013), neither strategy seems to have provided far-reaching benefits for local producers to date.

What is at stake here, it seems, is the different distribution of knowledge and interests along the commodity chains. As other research has also shown, the success of a GI product 'depends strongly on the producers' collective organization and [their] knowledge and skills about GIs' (Pick et al., 2017: 330). Thus, it is troubling that local knowledge of the GI potential among Yên Bái's ethnic minority cassia farmers remains limited. Concurrently, consumers at the other end of the chains are largely unaware of, and often uninterested in, the precise geographical origin of the product, while spice sellers may consciously hide these origins, because, as a former employee of a large Canadian-based spice import company argued, 'every economic incentive, in fact, supports continued obfuscation'.[39] 'Bridges between worlds

39. Email correspondence, former spice employee, 30 December 2018.

of knowledge' are still rare (Appadurai, 1986: 42), and attempts to increase the effectiveness of strategies like GI and to (re)connect producers and consumers will require more serious efforts to overcome this segmented knowledge along the chain.

Conceptually, with regard to the commodity chain literature, these findings point to the need to pay greater attention to the roles different actors play in creating value and commodity knowledge, and the need for a focus on how these values and knowledges impact (or not) producer livelihoods and other 'small-scale actors' at the starting nodes of commodity chains in the global South. Moreover, as Pick et al. (2017: 308) suggest, 'while the literature holds promises of GIs as tools for socioeconomic development, it has been noted that empirical data in this respect are lacking, especially from emerging and developing countries'. We found that the efforts of outsiders to enhance value, for example by creating a GI for Văn Yên District's cassia, have failed to create any meaningful benefits for local cultivators in the past nine years. This is not only a consequence of fragmented knowledge along the chain, but also relates to the preference of farmers for less complicated, low-risk strategies and, in particular, to the fact that the greatest profits are largely captured at more distant nodes along the chain. We suggest that for these and other value-adding strategies — such as organic labelling that is gaining interest internationally — to be more helpful and relevant for Vietnam cassia cultivators, it is necessary to focus carefully on different strategies of and interests in value creation at each commodity chain node. As Bassett et al. (2018: 1244) have noted, the agricultural value chain development literature 'typically presents smallholders as passive recipients of, if not obstacles to, agricultural innovations and market opportunities'. Conversely, this study has shown the need to place cultivators centrally in discussions of commodity value creation and to acknowledge their agency in decision making over their livelihoods. Their physical location in an upland Vietnamese province, with historical trade links to China, and nuanced knowledge of the volatility of their commodity, in addition to their own precarious position as ethnic minority farmers, results in certain trade opportunities being seized and others being virtually ignored. Development agencies, state officials and global retailers must recognize these local knowledges if they are serious about supporting pro-poor tropical commodity chains and strengthening ethnic minority livelihoods.

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**Annuska Derks** (corresponding author; annuska.derks@uzh.ch) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, University of Zurich, Switzerland. Her current research focuses on the social lives of everyday objects and spices in order to explore the links between social change, materiality and inequality in contemporary Vietnam.

**Sarah Turner** (sarah.turner@mcgill.ca) is Professor in the Department of Geography, McGill University, Canada. Her current research concerns ethnic minority livelihoods in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, and informal economy workers in socialist states. She is co-author of *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands* with C. Bonnin and J. Michaud (University of Washington Press, 2015).

**Ngô Thúy Hạnh** (ngohanh75@gmail.com) is an independent researcher based in Hanoi, Vietnam. She has worked alongside foreign researchers on social science topics ranging from rural livelihoods to migration, medical care, sexual practices and urban change. She is also Project Manager at Humanitarian Service for Children of Vietnam.