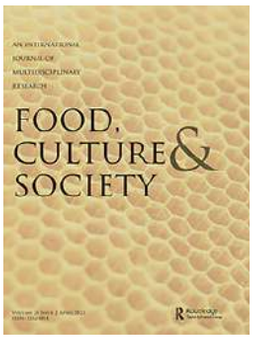

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Looking beyond the digital veil: an investigation of the (de) commodification of three "Vietnamese spices"

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary global spice trade is a multi-million dollar industry that frequently relies on Global North consumers' romantic visions of spices and their cultivators in the Global South. From fieldwork with ethnic minority farmers in upland northern Vietnam growing star anise, *Cinnamomum cassia* (often marketed as cinnamon), and black cardamom, and from a content analysis of digital marketing websites, it becomes clear that astute practices of commodification and de-commodification are invoked at different nodes along these spice global commodity chains. In this paper we investigate the strategies deployed by Vietnamese state officials, Vietnam-based exporting companies, and overseas importing and retail companies to promote and market these three spices. We find major disjunctures between the "geographical indications" approach advanced by the Vietnamese state to link products to particular places and peoples, and the "placeless" strategies mobilized by private Vietnamese and Chinese exporters. Global North importers further complicate the story, often attempting to de-commodify or de-fetishize the spices on digital-marketing platforms. By focusing on the final nodes along these commodity chains – yet to be studied or critiqued – our findings raise important questions regarding the implications of such divergent marketing strategies for farmers at the initial nodes of these spice chains.

KEYWORDS

Spice; star anise; cinnamon; black cardamom; Vietnam; commodity chains; digital marketing; de-commodification

Introduction

As spices move from cultivation to consumption nodes along complex commodity chains, they are subject to a number of strategies that transform their meaning and aim to increase their market value. These strategies are particularly notable at the marketing stages, when spices are often intertwined with representations of the cultures and locations where they are grown. One only needs to think of *pimentón* (paprika) from the south-eastern coast of Spain, fragrant vanilla beans from the forests of Mexico, or Himalayan pink salt to begin to recognize these patterns. Consumers frequently naturalize these associations which are reinforced by visual and textual stories in advertisements, shop displays, travel blogs, and magazines. In this case study we focus on star anise, *Cinnamomum cassia* (*C. cassia*, commonly considered cinnamon, a point we return to shortly), and black cardamom, three spices cultivated in the northern highlands

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here

of Vietnam. Each spice is an important cash-crop component of thousands of ethnic minority livelihoods, a key ingredient in many local specialties and traditional medicines, and highly popular on the global market. Indeed, when focusing on the global market, a quick search online reveals a US importer of Vietnam-grown star anise illustrating their website with a smiling young ethnic minority Hmong girl posed in a colonial-style French postcard advertising the spice (Figure 1), while a French-based spice importer displays a photograph of ethnic minority Yao (Dao) women in northern Vietnam wearing traditional embroidered clothes while working in the fields with *C. cassia* (misnamed *Cannelle de Saïgon* on the company's website) (Figure 2). Vietnam-sourced black cardamom undergoes similar exoticized representations that, as we will argue, attempt to

Figure 1. A pseudo-colonial style postcard on a website selling star anise. Source: David Vanille n.d. online. ALT TEXT: a US importer of Vietnam-grown star anise illustrates their website with an image of a smiling young ethnic minority Hmong girl waving at the camera. The backdrop is blurred upland sloping hills growing dry rice and maize (not star anise). The image is framed in a colonial-style French postcard.

Figure 2. A highly staged image of Yao women wearing their finest traditional clothing while working with *C. cassia* bark. (Source: Marie-Line House via Amazon.fr n.d. online). ALT TEXT: a French-based spice importer displays a photograph of ethnic minority Yao (Dao) women in northern Vietnam wearing traditional embroidered clothes while working in the fields with *C. cassia*. Two women in the background peel bark off a tree and a woman in the foreground holds bark while smiling at the camera.

de-commodify and de-fetishize the spices. Yet, while the use of such imagery and related texts is a highly effective strategy for projecting a distinctive or remote charm onto these spices, it obscures as much as it reveals about their origins. These stories tell us little about how star anise, *C. cassia* or black cardamom are exported from the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands to the Global North, or who the individuals responsible for their cultivation, processing, and trade are. The questions guiding our research are thus: who are the actors involved in the commodification of these three spices? How do the mechanisms these actors use to market the spices differ? What are the implications for the livelihoods of ethnic minority cultivators at the starting nodes of these commodity chains? And how do these spices become commodities and become fetishized – or perhaps how are they *de-commodified or de-fetishized* – as they travel from Vietnam's northern uplands to global consumer markets?

To answer these questions, we draw on the concepts of commodification and fetishism, thus necessarily situating our work within Marxist debates to some degree. In line with Marx's work, we take "fetishism" to be the processes through which physical commodities are divorced from the social relations by which they were produced (Marx [1867] 1976). From the moment objects are produced for exchange, they are suggested to "come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value" (Cohen 1988, 380). As their physical form obscures their social relations, fetishism becomes "inseparable from the production of commodities" (Marx [1867] 1976, 165). In the current context of late capitalism, Cook (2004) has argued that such insights are particularly relevant given the major disjunctures between "Western consumers and the distant strangers whose contributions to their lives [are] invisible, unnoticed, and largely unappreciated."

While engaging in these debates, scholars such as Allen and Kovach (2000), Lind and Barham (2004), and Foster (2006) have advanced the concept of "de-fetishization" whereby commodities are re-embedded within their networks in order to reveal the social, political, and cultural conditions under which they are created. Beyond the confines of academia, this pressure to increase the transparency of global commodity chains has led to similar "ethical consumption" trends, such as Fair Trade and organic labeling (Allen and Kovach 2000). However, there is much debate surrounding the efficacy of such approaches, with Gunderson (2014) having made the case that ethical consumerism is little more than "a new layer of commodity fetishism that masks the harms of capitalism by convincing society that the harms of capitalism can be rehabilitated with the commodity form itself." We keep these arguments in mind as we look "behind the veil" of the fetishization of star anise, *C. cassia*, and black cardamom cultivated in northern Vietnam (Harvey 1990, 422).

Next we present a brief overview of our methods, before introducing our conceptual framework. We draw on commodity chain analysis, and particularly the systems of provision approach, to contribute to conceptual discussions surrounding the de-commodification of food products. To provide context, we then introduce the farmers and trade intermediaries located in the highlands of northern Vietnam responsible for moving the three spices along the earlier nodes of the commodity chains. We subsequently direct our attention to an analysis of the middle and end nodes of the commodity chains; nodes that are essential for ethnic minority farmers to trade their spices but that have yet to be rigorously studied. In following these spices, we reveal the processes

through which star anise, *C. cassia*, and black cardamom are commodified and potentially de-commodified as they are subjected to a range of marketing and advertising schemes deployed by Vietnamese state officials, Vietnam-based exporting companies, and overseas importing and retail companies.

By considering how these strategies differ among the actors involved, and the possible impacts on spice farmers, we find there to be important disparities between the "geographical indications" marketing approach advanced by the Vietnamese state, aiming to tie commodities to particular districts, and the more "placeless" strategies mobilized by Vietnamese and Chinese exporters. Global North importers employ other methods again, often working to de-commodify – or de-fetishize – the spices on digital-marketing platforms. Ultimately, we are able to draw conclusions regarding the impact of such inconsistent marketing approaches adopted at the local, national, and international scales for the livelihoods of ethnic minority cultivators, and what this means for future de-commodification attempts regarding Vietnam's spice trade.

Materials and methods

Our results are chiefly informed by a content analysis of export, import, and retail websites claiming to sell the three spices we focus upon. We analyzed 50 websites selling Vietnam-sourced star anise, 50 websites selling Vietnam-sourced cinnamon (*C. cassia*), and 29 websites selling Vietnam-sourced black cardamom (the total number we found for black cardamom). We adopted several search parameters and criteria in order to focus the scope of our searches. First, we limited our content analysis to the websites of companies located in Vietnam, China, Australia, North America (United States and Canada), and Europe. We were able to facilitate this process by using region specific search engines and by modifying their settings to only display results from our chosen study locations. We established a set criteria of search terms, combining the name of the spice with the words "Vietnam," and "purchase" or "buy." As we targeted different countries/regions and used different languages to complete our searches, we translated the key search terms accordingly and added the name of the country/region of interest. We conducted our searches in ten languages (English, Vietnamese, simplified Chinese, French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian). For the five countries/regions we selected, we analyzed the first ten results that specified Vietnam as the origin of the spice, while excluding all sponsored advertisements. Taking into account that we were only able to identify 29 websites specifying that they sold Vietnamese black cardamom, we analyzed a total of 129 websites (Table 1).[1]

Once the websites had been identified, a text and image-based content analysis was completed. The textual analysis was thematic and initially drew on our conceptual framing, especially regarding (de)-commodification debates. Our *a priori* codes thus focused on whether the websites highlighted the peoples and places involved with the cultivation of the spices, farming techniques, livelihood strategies, medicinal and culinary uses, and historical details of the spices. However, we remained open to other codes and themes emerging from the websites and a number of *a posteriori* codes were identified, including (but not limited to) factory and processing facilities, managerial styles, employee details, and quality control. The images on each website were also analyzed with a focus on similar codes and themes. Additional themes emerging from the image

Table 1. Total numbers of marketing websites analyzed for five countries/regions[4].ALT TEXT: A table that has rows for each of the five countries/regions for which marketing websites were analyzed, and columns for each of the three spices. The totals for each spice and for each country/region are also provided. A total of 129 websites were analyzed.

	Star Anise Retailers	Cinnamon Retailers	Black Cardamom Retailers	Total per country/region
Vietnam	10	10	10	30
China	10	10	4	24
North America	10	10	5	25
Europe	10	10	10	30
Australia	10	10	0	20
Total per spice	50	50	29	**129 websites total**

analysis included more subtle depictions with regards to ethnicity, worker clothing, and the romanticization of farm work. The emerging codes and themes were iteratively cross-checked by the first and third authors for additional rigor (cf. Cope 2021).

To complement this content analysis, we also drew on fieldwork completed by the first author and her research assistant Ngô Thúy Hạnh in Lạng Sơn Province, Vietnam, on star anise in 2016, and in Yên Bái Province regarding *C. cassia* in 2017 (Figure 3). Interviews were completed in Lạng Sơn Province with 30 former and ongoing star

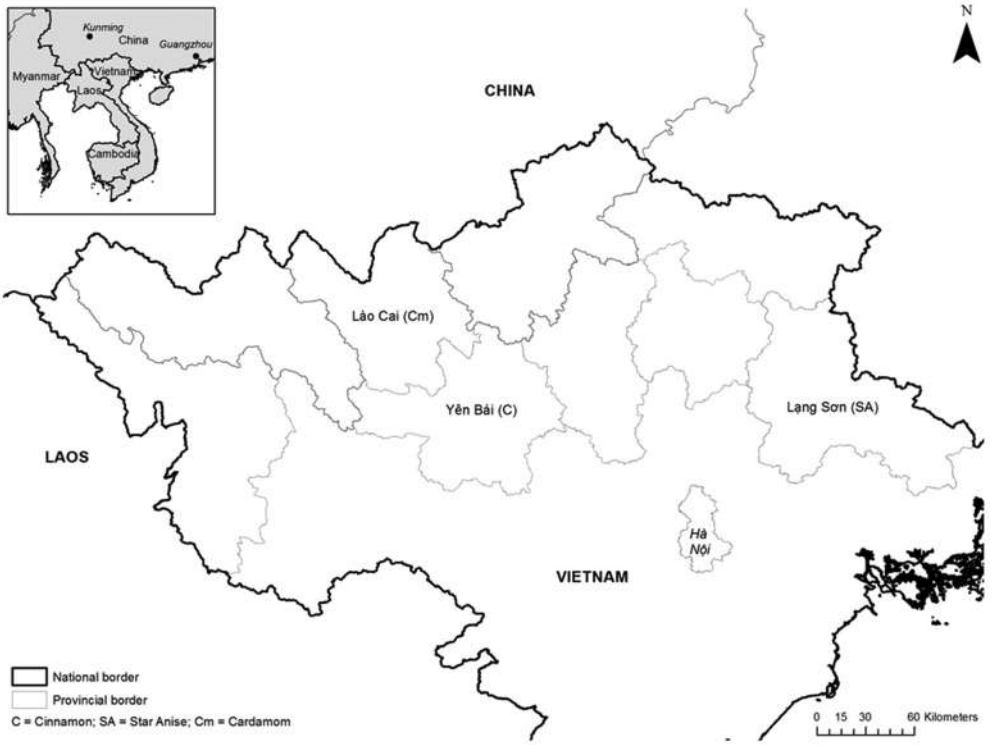

Figure 3. The three upland provinces where the spices are predominantly grown in northern Vietnam and the sites where fieldwork was completed, including Hanoi. ALT TEXT: A map showing the three upland provinces Lạng Sơn Province (star anise), Yên Bái Province (C. cassia), and Lào Cai Province (black cardamom) where the spices are predominantly grown in northern Vietnam and where fieldwork was completed.

anise cultivators, wholesalers, and export company representatives and workers, as well as four local state officials. In Yên Bái Province, a similar cross-section of 32 informants were interviewed regarding *C. cassia*, and five state officials.[2] The first author has been studying black cardamom for longer, with yearly fieldwork from 1999 to 2019 in Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, as well as interviews completed in Honghe and Wenshan Prefectures, Yunnan Province, China with cardamom growers and traders since 2008. Cardamom focused interviews have been completed with over 150 ethnic minority farmers cultivators with the assistance of ethnic minority Hmong and Yao interpreters. Forty trade intermediaries and wholesalers were also interviewed, as well as ten state officials, including market managers, border officers, and forest rangers, with the assistance of Vietnamese interpreters or alone. Over 40 interviews have also been completed with market traders in Hanoi selling the three spices at both wholesale and neighborhood markets, and a further 20 with Hanoi-resident consumers. Interviews with 20 spice wholesalers and retailers located in Kunming, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Auckland, Montréal, New York, and Paris were also undertaken. Finally, semi-structured interviews with Global North importing and retail representatives, and an author of an Asian cookbook and former restaurant critic contributed to our analysis.

Conceptual framing: commodity chain final nodes and (de)-commodification

By concentrating on the interconnected nodes and networks that make up relations of production and consumption, commodity chain analysis allows us to better understand "the sequence of processes by which goods and services are conceived, produced, and brought to market" (Bair 2009, 2; see also Gereffi, Korzeniewicz, and Korzeniewicz 1994; Lee 2010). In response to previous critiques that commodity chain analysis often ignores fine-grained processes occurring at the final nodes such as marketing, retail, and consumption – nodes of particular interest for our research – our framing draws on a systems of provision approach. Advanced by Fine and Leopold (1993, 79), this approach focuses on "the inclusive chain of activity that attaches consumption to the production that makes it possible." As Leslie and Reimer (1999) have detailed, the systems of provision approach not only focuses on the vertical connections within each chain, but assigns particular importance to the "horizontal factors" that shape commodity chains, including socio-economic and cultural dimensions (see also Brooks 2015). This approach is highly relevant to our case study, letting us pinpoint where along the commodity chains specific meanings and value are assigned to the spices (Bush 2004). By providing us with a basis to draw comparisons across nodes of parallel commodity chains, and also between the different spices, we are able to detail and critique the role of different groups of actors and different cultural processes in determining the way the spices are envisaged at specific nodes, and how this leads to their possible (de)-commodification (Goodman 2002; Craviotti 2016).

While commodification is generally taken to be the process by which a thing is "reified and transformed into a marketable item" (Linnekin 1997, 215), defining *de*-commodification has proven to be a more complicated task. Here we consider two interpretations that Bidwell, Murray, and Overton (2018a) have raised while focusing on "ethical" agro-food products and networks in Latin America, and the Global South at large. First, these scholars have proposed that the de-commodification of such

products can occur by "making their social and ecological origins visible" (Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018a, 2, see also Hudson and Hudson 2003). This interpretation is influenced by Marxist theory and is fairly closely aligned to the concept of "de-fetishization." De-commodification thus becomes a movement that aims to reveal the "hidden geographies of food," and in so doing, encourages consumers to engage in more ethical and sustainable consumption practices (ibid.). In a second interpretation of de-commodification, Bidwell, Murray, and Overton (2018a, 2) have looked to distance food products from the neoclassical understanding that commodities must be viewed "as undifferentiated products which must compete largely on price" (ibid., 2). Instead, they have employed de-commodification as a strategy to differentiate products' value based on quality, identity, and origin (ibid.). It is this second, slightly broader interpretation that we anticipate finding relevant to understanding the impacts and intentions of the marketing approaches adopted by Vietnamese state officials, Vietnam-based exporting companies, and overseas retailers. As Bidwell, Murray, and Overton (2018a, 2) have added "this second sense emphasises the agency of peripheral actors in mobilising local resources and traditions to differentiate their products."

A common strategy that agro-food producers and retailers use to distinguish their products is to create symbolic attachments between the commodity and its place of origin and/or the culture and ethnicity of its producers (Foster 2006; Hull 2016). Despite the potential of such approaches to redistribute power to the peripheral actors of commodity chains (Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018a), such strategies are commonly appropriated by Western companies looking "to profit by association with the 'traditional' products and methods of non-western cultures and places" (Hull 2016, 125–126). This often contributes to the further disenfranchisement of non-Western producers. Indeed, Global North companies will frequently resort to stereotypic and reductive representations of producers and their cultures in order to tap into consumers' imaginary understandings of "authenticity" (Foster 2006). Van Esterik (2006) has noted how North American chefs have focused on the rarity of algae chips and sweet and savory cassava cakes produced in Laos to highlight their exotic and unique nature to eager consumers. Researching the production, trade, and consumption of coffee originating in Papua New Guinea, West (2002) has argued that such associations are further reinforced by geographical indications that brand products with "exotic" images of the places where they are produced (West 2002). Further, in looking at indigenous producers' use of geographic source protection for products traditionally associated with a specific culture or region such as rooibos tea, Hull (2016) has proposed that such strategies, although problematic, hold sway in the international agro-food market as: "Consumers assign value to products based on their place of origin."

Western companies also seek to engage in product differentiation by mobilizing discourses of the "socially responsible" commodity. In relation to their work on the international food system, Arce and Marsden (1993) have suggested that as the exchange value of agro-food commodities is often related to consumer knowledge, companies increasingly promote the origins and production processes of commodities. Labeling products as socially or environmentally sustainable (for example Fair Trade, organic, eco-friendly) has therefore become a pathway for differentiation and distinguishing

quality "based on information and knowledge drawn from political and cultural dimensions of the consumer preferences" (ibid., 303). In this way, consumer choice has become a way to express one's politics as well as one's identity (West 2010).

Although many agro-food products hold particular significance for their producers, such associations are often obscured, lost, or transformed through their conversion into transnational commodities (Arce and Marsden 1993; Lind and Barham 2004). Notably, although the "material attributes" of products may remain constant as they are marketed, promoted, and sold, their cultural significance and corresponding value may be changed entirely (West 2002: 713). As such, West (2010) has reasoned that the "perceived value" that some consumers attach to commodities "does not stem from anything inherent in the sensual nature of the commodity itself but from projections created by advertising, marketing and consumer culture."

We draw on these debates, in tandem with the systems of provision approach to commodity chain analysis, to investigate how the mid- and final nodes in spice commodity chains are responsible for the differing, and often incongruous meanings that producers and consumers attach to star anise, *C. cassia*, and black cardamom. We reveal the roles that specific actors have in these processes and the degree to which their interventions are driven by the hopes to meet the expectations of Global North consumers.

Contextualizing initial commodity chain nodes in the sino-vietnamese borderlands

To provide some brief context regarding the cultivators of each of these spices, we turn first to star anise. In the northern Vietnamese provinces of Lạng Sơn, Quảng Ninh, Cao Bằng, and Bắc Kạn, star anise represents a key component of the composite livelihoods of thousands of ethnic minority households. With maize and rice as their staple crops, farmers have often viewed star anise as a reliable and long-term source of complementary cash income. This is particularly true in Lạng Sơn Province where Nùng and Tày ethnic minority households cultivate 70% of the country's star anise. Yet despite the dependability of star anise trees, important fluctuations in global market prices for this spice have led to unstable incomes for its cultivators. In recent years, the most significant impact on its value has resulted from the sudden rise, then fall, in demand for shikimic acid. This acid is found in star anise and is used to manufacture Tamiflu, an anti-influenza drug developed to treat the global avian and swine flu pandemics of the 2000s. Initially, this demand drove prices up dramatically, but as the pharmaceutical industry developed a synthetic replacement for shikimic acid, global demand for the spice crashed, undercutting its value on the global market, and significantly increasing farmer uncertainties (interviews 2016; see also Turner, Derks, and Hạnh 2019).

Confusion reigns with regards to which precise species of the genus *Cinnamomum* is being cultivated in northern Vietnam. As Derks, Turner, and Hạnh (2020) note, this is not "true cinnamon" (regarded to be *Cinnamomum verum* or Ceylon cinnamon) but *Cassia*, with ongoing uncertainty as to the exact species. Some farmers we interviewed made a distinction between "Chinese cinnamon" (*C. cassia*) and "Vietnamese cinnamon" (actual species unknown) while promoting the latter, while others admitted they were most likely growing "Chinese cinnamon" (interviews 2017). In any regard, as

Vietnam has undergone agrarian and market transitions, farmers within the northern provinces of Yên Bái, Thanh Hóa, and Quảng Nam have increasingly cultivated what is most likely to be *C. cassia* in order to obtain cash reserves. *C. cassia* gained particular popularity following the implementation of state policies in the 1990s that both legalized and encouraged its cultivation as part of national reforestation attempts. *C. cassia* cultivation has thus become an increasingly popular livelihood diversification strategy amongst the provinces' ethnic minority Yao households, and to a lesser extent Tày, Hmong, and ethnic majority Kinh farmers (interviews 2017; see also Derks, Turner, and Hạnh 2020).

Concurrently, many ethnic minority Hmong and Yao farmers residing in Vietnam's northern borderland regions, especially Lào Cai Province, have increasingly incorporated the trade of non-timber forest products (NFTPs) into their livelihoods as an income source, with black cardamom being a popular choice for those with access (albeit not necessarily use-rights) to suitable forest. Given the rising price of black cardamom, especially across the border in China, and the fact that it requires relatively little labor or chemical inputs, it has quickly gained traction as a means to raise cash, within these farmers' composite livelihoods (Turner 2017). However, recent increases in the frequency of extreme weather events in the northern borderlands, especially cold spells including hail and snow, have negatively impacted the livelihood security afforded by black cardamom cultivation (fieldwork interviews 2016–2019; see also Rousseau, Turner, and Xu 2019). We turn now to how these livelihood diversification options are integrated into global commodity chains.

Results: conflicting imaginaries and marketing contortions

Keen state officials but cautious farmers: geographical indications

Geographical indications are a marketing instrument used to tie commodities to specific geographical origins in ways that reflect their "socio-cultural embeddedness" (Niederle and Gelain 2013, 1). In writing on the GI for Mexican tequila, Bowen and Zapata (2009, 108) have argued that these indications are thus "framed as sources of resistance against the homogenizing effects of 'placeless' food production systems" and can be mobilized to contribute to de-commodification efforts (see also Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018b). Further, a growing body of scholarship points to the potential of geographical indications to increase the comparative socio-economic power of Global South producers in the governance of commodity chains (Pick, Marie-Vivien, and Kim 2017). As an example, in relation to their work on Vietnam's laws, use, and practices surrounding GIs, Pick, Marie-Vivien, and Kim (2017) have posited that such indications enable producers to "access new or existing markets, gain a competitive advantage, and make a profit from product differentiation" (ibid., 307). In Vietnam, a number of non-government organizations (NGOs), along with influential government officials have promoted the adoption of such marketing approaches that link particular Vietnamese commodities to specific places and communities (UNCTAD 2015; Pick, Marie-Vivien, and Kim 2017). Within the past 15 years the country has witnessed a rapid rise in the establishment of geographical indications, including for "cinnamon" from Văn Yên district, Yên Bái Province since 2010, and star anise from

Lạng Sơn Province since 2007 (ibid.). Nonetheless, the Vietnamese legal system facilitates the top-down and state-directed management of these geographical indications with ambiguous consequences for farmers, as we return to shortly (Pick, Marie-Vivien, and Kim 2017).

During interviews, the provincial government officials involved in the establishment of these geographical indications for star anise and cinnamon were highly enthusiastic about the potential of the indications to expand spice exports. As an example, one Lạng Sơn Province official noted: "We're very proud of our star anise. Now everyone will get to know more about it with the geographical indication marker . . . You should know it's far better than Chinese star anise" (interview 2016). In a similar vein, a Yên Bái-based official working with *C. cassia* cultivators exclaimed: "The geographical indication is a very good idea. We can use it to make everyone know about the special qualities of our cinnamon" (interview 2017).

In contrast, farmers cultivating star anise and *C. cassia* whom we interviewed had very little interest in, or knowledge of, the geographical indication schemes put in place. The geographical indication for Yên Bái "cinnamon" is linked exclusively to Văn Yên District, yet few farmers in the district with whom we spoke thought it would help them. For example, a relatively well-off farmer explained: "I don't really know much about the geographical indication. Somebody told me a bit about it, but I don't really see what difference it makes to me. I already have good connections to the people I trade with; why would I change that? They give me a fair price already" (interview 2017). We only encountered one farmer living outside of Văn Yên District aware of the cinnamon geographical indication, however as his land was not eligible for the scheme he felt he had no stake in its implementation or success.

Similarly, we found that farmers in Lạng Sơn Province had little confidence in current or past government schemes to support star anise-based livelihoods. Many farmers recounted the lack of government support during the Tamiflu boom and bust of the early 2000s and were weary of government promises of support for the sector. As articulated by one farmer: "I have good links with a trader who buys my star anise. I don't think the government will help me any better because they haven't helped at all in the past to support us growing star anise" (interview 2016). It thus becomes clear that farmers felt more secure relying on their own relations with trade intermediaries and exporters than on government connections. Moreover, interviewees were either unaware of the existence of the geographical indication program or did not believe it would benefit their livelihoods.

It is interesting to note that officials have not moved to register a geographical indication for black cardamom. According to conversations with Lào Cai provincial officials, this was intentional in order to avoid encouraging the expansion of its cultivation. Black cardamom grows under the forest cover of mature trees and its cultivation often occurs in state designated nature reserves or national parks, making it illegal. As explained by a lowland Kinh forest ranger working in Lào Cao Province:

> When the ethnic minority people expand their cardamom in the [Hoàng Liên National] Park it destroys vegetation. It's not good for the Park. I know what you mean when you ask about a geographical indication, because my uncle works in Yên Bái, but we don't want that here for cardamom; it's very different for cinnamon in Yên Bái as that's not in the forest" (interview 2018).

These differing testimonies, especially for star anise and cinnamon, point to a clear disjuncture in the perceptions held by state officials and farmers regarding the merits of geographic indications for these spices. This led us to question the degree to which geographic indications are drawn upon by Vietnamese exporting companies, and whether or not they are recognized by Global North retailers and consumers. As a point of comparison, we also became interested in knowing how the lack of a geographic indication for black cardamom factors into its marketing and, specifically, whether its socio-cultural and geographical origins are still featured in retailers' advertisements.

Upland trade intermediaries: important trust based relationships

The specific levels of profits that accrue to local traders involved with star anise, *C. cassia*, and black cardamom in the northern Vietnam uplands are unknown due to traders' fears of "trade secrets" becoming public knowledge. We do know though, that once star anise is harvested twice a year (spring and fall), it is typically sold to small- and medium- scale traders within the commune, or to large-scale wholesalers in Lạng Sơn City. These intermediaries tend to be local Kinh or Tày with strong ties to the farmers from whom they purchase the spice. From these commodity nodes, some star anise is traded directly to Chinese buyers from Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region who meet Vietnam-based intermediaries at a Sino-Vietnamese border crossing nearby. However, the majority of star anise is transported to Hanoi where it is processed to be sold locally, or from where it is exported. Significantly, a large proportion of star anise is distilled into essential oil. Beyond China – the world's largest supplier of star anise – overseas buyers for Vietnam's star anise and its derivatives were noted to be most commonly from Thailand, Bangladesh, Singapore, India, the US, and Turkey (interviews 2016).

In the case of Yên Bái *C. cassia*, once the trees are pruned or felled, their bark, leaves, and timber are sold to local traders with whom farmers have long established trade relations. These traders then sell the *C. cassia* and associated products to wholesalers located within the province, or, more commonly, based in the outskirts of Hanoi or neighboring Bắc Ninh Province. Unlike with star anise, China is only one of many important trade destinations for "Yên Bái cinnamon" along with Singapore and India. The quality of the spice's bark (determined largely by its essential oil content and thickness) is the primary determinant of its trade route. While Western country importers tend to demand the highest-grade bark, Bangladesh, China, and India-based importers more commonly purchase mid-grade bark. The lowest quality bark is exported to China where it undergoes further processing (interviews 2017).

Turning to black cardamom, during the harvest season (August to October), Hmong and Yao cultivators sell their supplies to local, small-scale Kinh, Giáy, or Tày traders with whom they have developed trusting relationships. It is common for such transactions to be based on credit whereby the farmers receive cash in advance of their harvests. The small-scale traders then transport the cardamom to Lào Cai city, on the Sino-Vietnamese border, where they sell it to Kinh wholesalers, or alternatively, the traders are periodically visited by such wholesalers. In contrast to such local traders, Kinh wholesalers based at the border have significant social and financial capital that provides them with privileged knowledge of market trends in China and more broadly. Like star anise, the majority of

black cardamom travels to China for use in China's pharmaceutical industry. Meanwhile, from Lào Cai city only a relatively small proportion of black cardamom travels down to Hanoi for distribution and consumption within Vietnam.

At these early nodes of the commodity chains, social capital, face-to-face negotiations, and trust are central to the sale and trade of the spices. This highlights how a focus on the horizontal aspects of the systems of provision approach to commodity chains reveals the nature of specific relationships, and the degree to which these are rooted in cultural norms and specific places (Leslie and Reimer 1999). However, as the spices move further along the chains from their place of origin, online advertisements and marketing become key. We investigate these features next.

Vietnam-based exporters: online marketing showcasing professional staff and factories

Starting with star anise, we found that by far the most common visual marketing approach employed by Vietnamese retailers on their websites was to include close-up images of the raw spice. A number of websites also pictured images of the spice on the trees, with one website including a brief video of a forest where it is implied – but not explicitly stated – that the spice is harvested. More than half the retailers also featured images of their companies' facilities, including factories and warehouses where large quantities of the spice are dried, sorted, processed, and stored. Few companies included images of employees.

Through our content analysis of *C. cassia* retailers, it was clear that scenes of the raw spice being sorted, dried, or processed were by far the most commonly depicted images. Interestingly, in contrast to the images on star anise retailer websites, company workers were featured far more often in these photos, including factory workers handling *C. cassia* and office workers in formal attire posing in front of the packaged spice. Similarly, small and large groups of workers were shown posing in front of company logos, awards, or with individuals who appeared to be international trade partners. Another common visual theme was to include images of the spice in stick- or ground-form, along with images of prepared meals that could potentially include *C. cassia*.

In the case of black cardamom retailers, images of raw black cardamom pods were featured prominently on all websites, while processing and storage facilities were depicted on three-quarters. Half the websites included images of company employees sorting, inspecting, or processing the spice, or posing in formal attire. Just less than half of the websites included photographs of fresh cardamom along with action shots of cultivators picking, sorting, and drying the spice. These individuals were frequently shown donning traditional ethnic minority clothing or the conical hats commonly associated with Kinh rice farmers. Oddly, one website included images of hydroponic farms with no relation to cardamom cultivation whatsoever.

A horizontal comparison of the website content of Vietnam-based retailers at this commodity chain node revealed little variation in their marketing strategies. In general, each retailer was very vague regarding the origin of their spices, including the locations where they are grown and the individuals responsible for their cultivation. Visual emphasis was instead placed on depicting quality control, processing approaches, and storage capacities, as well as industrial facilities and workers. Many retailers also

emphasized the professionalism and prestige of their companies, with some listing international certifications and awards for their products. In contrast, there was no mention of geographical indications or Fair Trade certifications aimed at ensuring more equitable trade relations for local producers, a fact we reflect upon later.

International wholesalers and retailers: shaping customer expectations

Our accompanying content analysis of spice retailers' marketing websites in China, North America, Europe, and Australia revealed additional telling patterns regarding how specific knowledge that could de-commodify or de-fetishize the spices – such as details concerning their cultivators and place of origin – was either highlighted or ignored. We focus here on *comparisons* of online marketing strategies across the five case study regions/countries, including Vietnam.[3]

Star anise online marketing strategies compared

A comparative analysis across all the star anise marketing websites revealed that the majority of China-based sites appeared to be marketing to international wholesale buyers, seemingly in the pharmaceutical industry as these retailers frequently mentioned its shikimic acid. Almost every Vietnamese and Chinese website described various health benefits of star anise, with these ranging from the spice's role as a cough suppressant to its alleged ability to cure cancer. Many China- and Vietnam-based retailers highlighted the longstanding satisfaction of their global clientele – perhaps to assure prospective customers of their product's quality and international trade accomplishments – often including a long list of countries where they had conducted business.

Only three North American retailers and two Chinese retailers clearly listed a province of origin for their star anise. The remaining seven North American and eight Chinese sites merely listed the origin as Vietnam or advertised the spice as Vietnamese. The majority of European retailers and all of the Australian retailers only listed the spice's place of origin as "Vietnam," with the exception of one European site that even more vaguely listed the origin as "Vietnam, China."

The spice's culinary uses took center stage for Australian and North American retailers, while two of the Australian companies and four of the North American companies also mentioned star anise's uses in traditional Chinese medicine. One North American retailer even blended the culinary and medicinal benefits by describing star anise as "an intoxicating scent – induces hunger in the kitchen and lust in the bedroom" (Beanilla n.d. online). Intriguingly, not a single Australian retailer selling star anise included images with people nor made any mention of the spice's cultivators. This was also the case with Australia-based retailers of Vietnam-sourced *C. cassia*, analyzed shortly.

The European and North American retailers appeared the most willing to provide potential customers with information on the cultivation and history of star anise, Australia less so, with this not being a priority at all for China and Vietnam-based merchants. However, on European and North American sites this information almost always focused on growing techniques, such as when the spice is harvested, how it is dried, and so forth, rather than on the people cultivating it. One French retailer did describe a local custom in Lạng Sơn Province, pointing out that "it is customary . . . to

plant a [star anise] tree at the birth of a child. 15 years later, the star anise harvested will be used to finance that child's education" (David Vanille n.d. online). This feel-good story attempts to connect the global consumer to the local producer, albeit in a romanticized and exaggerated way, as it is questionable whether this is a widespread custom; it was certainly never raised during our interviews with farmers when local customs were being discussed.

C. cassia online marketing strategies compared

Turning to compare all the websites for Vietnam-sourced *C. cassia*, the North America- and Australia-based websites tended to focus to a greater degree on retail sales rather than wholesale, which remained the focus for Vietnam- and China-based exporters. Although neither North American nor Australian retailers included any images featuring people on their websites selling *C. cassia*, the Australian retailers left out the human dimension to a far greater degree in their text descriptions as well. Three different North American retailers described the farmers who grow and cultivate their spices, with two of the three sites mentioning that these are often ethnic minorities. Yet, as for star anise, not a single Australian retailer made any mention of the cultivators.

Interestingly, the France-based retailer Marie-Line House (n.d. online) with staged images of *C. cassia* harvesting (Figure 2) was the only exporter/retailer of the 129 websites analyzed that mentioned a "*Indication géographique*" while pinpointing Yên Bái Province as the source. The same site however, then noted that the spice was "*la Cannelle de Saïgon,"* a cinnamon category that does not exist (see also Derks, Turner, and Hạnh 2020). Several other European retailers framed the Vietnam-sourced "cinnamon" they were selling as a "weight loss supplement" and "superfood," with one website even boasting that "a little cinnamon in the coffee can be the difference between losing weight or not at all" (Allt-fraktfritt.se). Although many Chinese and Vietnamese websites mentioned the medicinal qualities of the spice, with one Vietnamese website even framing it as an "indispensable" and "precious" medicine, this specific "weight loss" focus was only highlighted by European retailers.

The North American websites provided potential customers with the history of the spice and its sustainable nature to a greater degree than China, Europe, Australia or Vietnam-based websites. Some of the product descriptions on North American websites were rather romanticized however, with histories focusing on specific events, with one website elaborating on the spice's use in ancient Egypt during the embalming process and in the Middle Ages as an ingredient in love potions (Spices Inc n.d. online). Nonetheless, this same website provided a clear distinction between cinnamon and *C. cassia*, a difference the majority of websites ignored.

Many North American and Australian websites emphasized the sustainable nature of plantation management, however, the majority of these websites took what we have termed a "Millennial friendly" approach to advertising, with a number of casual comments being made to attract potential customers. These ranged from "Vietnamese cinnamon is the butt-kicker cinnamon of the cooking world" and "the silverback gorilla of the cinnamon world, all the younger cinnamons know to stay out of the way" (Beanilla n.d. online) to: "Once you taste this stuff, nothing else compares . . . " (Silk Road Spice Merchant n.d. online). Clearly, such commentaries reveal little about the lives or livelihoods of *C. cassia* cultivators, focusing exclusively on the consumption angle of the spice.

Black cardamom online marketing strategies compared

Turning to compare the black cardamom websites that we analyzed, we again found that most of the European and North American websites focused on retailing to local consumer markets, selling black cardamom in packages ranging from 25 to 500 grams. In contrast, the Chinese and Vietnamese websites were predominantly exporting large quantities of the spice with prices listed per kilogram or metric ton. The product descriptions on North American websites often noted the "all natural" growing or drying processes for the black cardamom they stocked, whereas Chinese and Vietnamese websites often emphasized food quality and safety, listing various certifications as a testament to the quality of their product. As was the case with Vietnam-based websites, most China-based websites focused almost exclusively on the technical specifications of the spice, with only one quarter mentioning any culinary uses.

In the case of the European and North American retailers, over 60% of the websites from these two regions included information regarding the spice's culinary uses, while the remaining retailers focused on medicinal uses. Although 80% of the Vietnamese retailers listed the spice's specific province of origin, no European retailers and only two-fifths of North American retailers and one-quarter of Chinese retailers mentioned a specific province, revealing that the livelihoods or other characteristics of the cultivators are of little interest for retailers and wholesalers. As noted earlier, we were unable to find a single Australian-based spice importer or retailer that noted that their black cardamom was sourced from Vietnam. Given that Australian sites selling the other two spices effectively ignored the peoples and places where those spices were cultivated, perhaps black cardamom from Vietnam *is* sold in Australia, but this lack of interest in spice origins means that these details are disregarded. Alternatively it might indicate that other sources of the spice, such as China, have squeezed out Vietnam exporters.

Farmer resilience in the face of clumsy de-commodification and inadequate geographical indications

By following a systems of provision approach and applying a horizontal lens to the mid- and end-nodes of these commodity chains, our analysis reveals a number of similarities, but also intriguing divergences in the priorities of online wholesalers and retailers for star anise, *C. cassia*, and black cardamom. In the case of companies located in North America and Europe, it is clear that their priority is to attract individual customers and small-scale retail outlets with an interest in specialized commodities. A number of retailers therefore choose to employ stereotypical images and/or descriptions of the spices' cultivators and their cultures in order to project an "exotic" character. Australian-based retailers tend to differ in their approach, focusing to a far greater degree on environmental and sustainability concerns, while ignoring the individuals involved. In contrast again, Vietnamese and Chinese retailers place far greater emphasis on bulk sales of the spices to Global North importing companies with large purchasing power. The Vietnam- and China-based websites therefore highlight the professionalism and logistical capabilities of their companies, including quality assurance, storage and handling capacities, safe and secure packaging, and the ability to meet high quantity and quality demands.

These findings were corroborated by key informant North American importer representatives who attend international trade fairs and meet with Vietnamese and Chinese wholesalers. They explained that at these trade fairs, negotiations and discussions similarly revolve around details regarding quantities, shipping costs and times, abilities to meet demands, and quality control. Conversely, details of the cultivators, their livelihoods, and specific source regions are seldom discussed (interviews 2019).

We find that as star anise, *C. cassia*, and black cardamom move from the cultivation to consumption nodes of their commodity chains, they undergo complex and non-linear processes of de-commodification and commodification. First, efforts by the Vietnamese state to link star anise and cinnamon to specific places and peoples through the establishment and promotion of geographical indications contributes to their de-commodification (cf. Bowen and Zapata 2009; Pick, Marie-Vivien, and Kim 2017; Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018b). At this early stage, the spices are presented as specialized products with specific origins. However, such efforts are largely undone by Vietnam- and China-based wholesalers whose primary objective is to shift large volumes of the spices. For these wholesalers, their professionalism, supply capacities, quality assurance, and facilities supplant details surrounding spice origins and relations of production. The spices thus come to be viewed as "placeless" commodities, evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange values (Appadurai 2013; Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018a). Yet when the spices are marketed by North American and European companies – but less so by Australian retailers – their origins come into play again as many of these companies seek to mobilize specific geographic features and culture to differentiate their products on the international market. Commonly this takes the form of employing visual tropes of the spices' ethnic minority producers that paint them in a highly reductive and exoticized light (Figures 1 and 2); these farmers certainly do not wear their finest clothing when working in their fields. Paradoxically, such marketing approaches serve to reinforce the same narratives about upland minorities that the Vietnamese state has propagated for decades. The Vietnamese state has long engaged in this type of selective "cultural preservation," choosing on behalf of ethnic minority groups how best to represent the "content and character" of their "ethnic distinctiveness" (Koh 2004, 16). By portraying these individuals farming in traditional dress, in highly stereotyped depictions, these marketing websites obscure the complexities and realities of the social and cultural relations by which the commodities were produced (Gunderson 2014). This leads us to re-pose the question, who benefits the most from these disparate marketing methods?

Despite the fact that the use of geographical indications are heavily promoted by the Vietnamese state as well as by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and development agencies, our sampling approach led us to only one website with a brief mention of a geographical indication. Additional searches for geographical indications for *any* Vietnamese-sourced spices listed on Chinese, European, North American, or Australian retailer websites only produced one additional "hit." We therefore question the extent to which these geographical indication initiatives actually serve to empower the peripheral actors in the governance of their global commodity chains (see Pick, Marie-Vivien, and Kim 2017). Indeed, it is interesting to reflect on the comments of a long-term Kinh resident of Lào Cai Province when asked about the potential of a geographical indication for black cardamom. He explained at length:

> Honestly, I have to tell you, I think it's a pretty useless idea. Because this organization from [European country] has supposedly invested millions to help Lào Cai develop. But look at the results! They told everyone to grow Bắc Hà plums and then the prices plunged 'cos everyone started to grow them. Now you see the grape vines in Sapa District? That's their latest 'great idea'. So, I don't think a geographical indication is good for cardamom. Because it'll lead to over cultivation and no one here will benefit. In the meantime look at all the party officials that come to visit in their white SUVs – where do you think the money came from? Yeah, the same project (interview 2019).

While this could be argued to be a rather skeptical reflection, it corroborates our own findings that the geographical indication schemes for star anise and *C. cassia* have not produced meaningful benefits for ethnic minority cultivators to date. Indeed, while we recognize the potential of geographical indication initiatives to increase the socio-economic standing of local producers (see Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018a), the only impact they appear to have had for these two spices is in relation to how they are marketed locally through state-sponsored billboards, and provincial and national trade-fairs. Given that only a fraction of these spices are purchased and consumed within the country, and that such initiatives have failed to translate into notable differences regarding how the spices are marketed abroad, it is dubious that such efforts are improving the livelihoods of local cultivators.

But for argument's sake, let us suggest that there might be a genuine desire by some NGOs, social enterprises, or local government officials to support local spice cultivators in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. If this were the case, then these groups could work with ethically-inclined retailers – in Vietnam and abroad – to create websites that provide accurate information on the livelihoods and everyday practices of upland cultivators. This would converge with Bidwell, Murray, and Overton (2018a) second interpretation of de-commodification outlined earlier, specifically that de-commodification results in price being less central to the value people assign to products. Nonetheless, reflecting on Bidwell, Murray, and Overton's (2018a) initial interpretation of de-commodification, with closer conceptual links to Marxist analysis, it is more difficult to imagine a scenario where this could be fulfilled. As authors such as Gunderson (2014) have argued, aiming for de-commodification through "ethical consumerism" does little to challenge market capitalism or "de-fetishize" the product. No matter how tightly marketing is wrapped in images of ethnic minority producers and their fields, merely convincing concerned consumers that they can buy an "ethically produced" item does not diminish nor resolve the problems linked with capitalism (Bidwell, Murray, and Overton 2018a). Just providing more accurate website information thus allows us to ignore the more structurally rooted concerns that capitalist relations cause in Global South agrarian settings, including in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands (see also Fridell 2007; Alkon and McCullen 2011).

All told, the ethnic minority farmers cultivating these three spices are mindful that their positions within these commodity chains are unlikely to be dramatically altered in a positive way by geographical indications or website designs. Well-intentioned overseas retailers could potentially play a role in improving the power relations currently entrenched in these commodity chains, but as our analyses have shown, this has yet to happen to date. As a consequence these farmers – once again – need to remain resilient, drawing on their own traditional ecological knowledge, and their long-standing social ties and trust-based networks, to maintain their upland livelihoods as best they can.

Notes

1. We found that Vietnamese grown *C. Cassia* and star anise are more widely traded on the international market and we were able to identify more retail websites for these spices than for Vietnamese black cardamom which we determined is far less commonly traded internationally.
2. Some farmer interviews were completed by research assistant Ngô Thúy Hạnh, without the first author present with lengthy debriefs afterward, but all quotes in this article are from interviews with the first author in attendance.
3. Our individual analyses of the online marketing strategies we found for China, North America, Europe, and Australia websites are included as Supplemental Material for this article.
4. Some of the websites change their visual and textual content fairly frequently, hence our analysis is based on the text and images we recorded when we first accessed the websites.

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