CHAPTER TWO

FUJIAN TEA PRODUCTION, 1920–1960

Introduction

The state of the Fujian tea industry was a vexation for contemporary commentators in the province. In seeking a permanent solution, contemporary reformers—depending on their political leanings—claimed to have found the key to solving the problem and proposed solutions based largely upon an appeal to nationalism, economics, racism or communism. At a time when China was neither politically nor economically strong (compared to the Western imperial powers and Japan), these commentators concluded that the ailing industry was evidence of the international decline in Chinese prestige. The revival of the trade was not the only national issue for the industry between 1890 and 1937,\(^1\) the entire tea industry—from planting, to picking, processing, packaging and exportation—was the issue. The Fujian industry was beset with many problems, but for the Chinese tea merchants who had migrated to Singapore, the main ones remained the traditional labour-intensive methods of production and political instability in the province. After 1949, tea production and prices were the major sources of concern for these merchants.


China was the world’s largest producer until the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 because of the sheer size of its domestic market. China, however, was unable to compete effectively with India and Ceylon in international trade. In 1939, China produced half of the world’s tea but its exports lagged behind India, Ceylon, the Dutch East Indies and

Japan. What concerned the overseas Chinese merchants in Singapore, however, was bleaker—tea output in Fujian was small compared to other provinces. In 1931, Fujian produced 145,000 piculs (about 19,333,330 pounds) or 4.3 percent of all tea produced in China. Its output increased to 245,530 piculs (about 32,737,330 pounds) in 1934, with Anxi producing 8,780 piculs. Despite the small quantities compared to national output, however, tea remained an important commodity for Fujian because it was ranked either first or second in terms of provincial exports.

In Fujian, rice was the main crop. A 1939 study found that 'rice takes precedence over everything else on irrigated land and on slopes within reach of water'. Tea was grown on small plots of land as a secondary crop and tea processing only served as an additional source of income. The American commercial attaché noted that 'tea is grown in small patches round the homesteads of the peasant proprietors, large plantations being practically unknown'. When the crop failed, the farmers merely switched to another crop. The presence of so many smallholdings made it difficult to implement effectively uniform quality standards across China. On the other hand, in India and Ceylon, tea was a plantation crop grown specifically for export. It was processed using machines; strict standards were imposed on production and export. The plantation system was a means to reap huge earnings. In 1939, tea grown on plantations in Ceylon accounted for more than

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