

## Quality Control and the Loss of the Commons

Janet C. Sturgeon, The Watson Institute, Brown University, [Janet\\_Sturgeon@brown.edu](mailto:Janet_Sturgeon@brown.edu)

RCSD Politics of the Commons Conference, Chiang Mai, Thailand, July 11-14, 2003

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the local village elections held in 2000 in Mengsong, a Hani (Akha) administrative village in China. The elections are a focal point for exploring the converging effects of a number of current national policies and representations of people and the environment. These include the definitions of people of high quality and low quality (cf. Anagnost) in relation to minority nationalities; a new definition of citizens to include business people as one of the three groups in China (with peasants and workers) that the Chinese Communist Party represents; and the official rationale for the timber ban in Western China. By analyzing how these seemingly disparate representations and processes have played out in Mengsong, this study shows how the local village elections, under township guidance to elect “people of quality,” actually moved considerable control of local administration to the township level. The timber ban and the rising salience of business people, meanwhile, have taken much control over local land use away from Mengsong. The future “people of quality” may well be the entrepreneurs from outside Mengsong who contract to mine its minerals, rather than the “more educated” village officials put in place through the village elections. This study also reveals how the loss of commons from the timber ban, together with the loss of income from mining, have brought about a drop in household incomes, causing Mengsong to be designated in 2002 as an official “poor village.”

The five-year period from 1998 to 2003 saw a rapid loss of the commons in Mengsong, an upland ethnic minority village<sup>1</sup> in China on the Burma border. As a result of the timber ban (1998) and ecological construction components of the Open Up the West project, the Chinese state has reclaimed the forest and set in train reforestation on lands that had been upland cultivated fields and “wastelands”. The central government justifies this massive re-greening on environmental grounds. But the extent to which the state is re-claiming and re-categorizing lands that are now to be forested is also the extent to which these forests and lands have moved out of the control of upland farmers.

Curiously, this loss of control over forests and sloping agricultural lands for villagers has

taken place at the same time as local village elections have gradually been implemented across Yunnan, where Mengsong is located. These elections have been touted as instituting “local self-governance” in Chinese villages, with elected village committees responsible for managing their own affairs, including their own lands. These two processes, the loss of local control over substantial areas of land, including commonly managed resources, and increased village control over “local affairs” seem like contradictory phenomena. Indeed, the 1987 law authorizing local village elections had also made village committees the owners of village land. By December 2000, when local village elections were implemented in Mengsong, however, a timber ban was in force and a project called ecological construction was about to begin.

This paper examines both the state’s reclaiming of the forest and other sloping lands, as well as Mengsong local village elections. To make sense of these two state-led processes, the reclaiming of forests and the local village elections, I place them in the context of the massive floods in 1998 and China’s preparations for accession into WTO. I also look at the reconfiguration over a five-year period of people of high quality and people of low quality (cf. Anagnost n.d.). An understanding of the recalibration of various kinds of people helps illuminate the official view of who deserves control over rural resources, who deserves to be elected to village committees, and indeed who will mobilize China’s engagement with foreign firms and foreign investment as China becomes more completely included in the global economy. It also illuminates who will lose control of local resources, governance, and economic development.

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<sup>1</sup> With the election came new names. The former administrative village is now the “village,” and former hamlets are now small groups (*xiao zu*). To avoid confusion I use the old terminology, recognizing that this is now an anachronism.

In the discussion here, I relate the definitions of people of high and low quality to minority nationalities, citizenship, entrepreneurship, and poverty. Ann Anagnost asserts that the multitude of migrant laborers in China, who are represented as people of low quality (*suzhi di*), in fact provide the surplus value that fuels China's economic growth. As she writes, "The laboring migrant body is the hidden source of wealth production in China's economic "take-off," even as its "lack of value" is blamed for China's backwardness." (Anagnost n.d.) She contrasts this "low quality" with the "high quality" of urban Chinese children, in whom parents invest considerable funds for education, culture, and special training that will produce people who are highly educated, scientific, rational, and entrepreneurial—the characteristics of people of "high quality."

This paper is based on research in 2002, during a follow up study to my previous research in Mengsong during 1996-97. I set out to discover how the local village elections had affected Mengsong villagers' access to resources. Although the election had taken place too recently (December 2000) for direct effects to be apparent, what I found instead was that the timber ban and the Open Up the West project were having profound effects on local resource access. As I traced the events surrounding the election, I realized that the election narrative also fit within the national discourse of people of high and low quality. In spite of the seeming contradiction between the elections and local loss of forest control, the local village elections in Mengsong in 2000 also contributed to preparation for WTO, but not in the ways that the elections had been heralded when they were authorized in 1987.

Based on the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees of 1987, local village elections were to establish local self-government and promoted as a step toward

democracy (Chan 1998:509). The law was designed to increase village cadre accountability (O'Brien 1994:36) and move toward transparency in village governance and the rule of law, both required by the WTO (Horsley 2001:52). The push for local village elections was part of the general devolution of decision-making and fiscal responsibility ushered in with the dissolution of communes in 1982 (Goodman 2001). As part of this devolution, the Organic Law of 1987 made villager committees the owners of village lands, including any collective property. Following direct election of village committees, these committees were supposed to “manage their own affairs,” including village lands, in compliance with the laws.

To understand the import of the changes that took place between 1997 and 2002, it is useful to review the dynamics of Mengsong in 1997. This includes local governance, resource access, land use, and livelihoods. It also includes the official narratives circulating at that time about Akha and their forest management.

### **Governance**

The administrative village head in 1997, who had a flare for skewing benefits toward himself, had been appointed by the township in 1993 in an emergency move when the old administrative village head suddenly died. Beginning in 1982, as part of the economic reform process, villagers had ordinarily elected the administrative village head from a slate of candidates drawn up by the township. The person appointed by the township, whom I will call Akheu, continued to be supported by township officials from 1993 to 1998, even as he proved to be remarkably corrupt. As natural resources in Mengsong became commodities, he found ways to funnel the profits to himself.

Hamlet heads were elected, also beginning in 1982, reportedly using ballots in elections that took place every three years. Those hamlet heads in place in 1997 were busily protesting the administrative village head's corruption to several levels of government administration. I have reason to believe that their relentless protests brought down Akheu in 1998. These hamlet heads were smart, savvy, and active in promoting projects for their hamlets. They were approaching numerous line agencies to fund projects that hamlets had decided to undertake.

### **Resource Access**

In 1984, as part of the devolution of responsibility to local levels, state foresters had distributed the local forest in the following way: forests in best condition were claimed by the government as state forests; a collective forest was allocated to each hamlet for house construction; and each household was allocated wooded plots for fuel wood. While there were strict regulations for use of all these kinds of forestlands, the collective forest and fuel wood forests were contracted to villagers for periods of 50 years. According to my own forest measurements at that time, the forests in Mengsong were in reasonably good condition, and likely to improve (Sturgeon 2000).

Each household also acquired lands for wet rice and vegetable cultivation, and sites for shifting cultivation, under similar long-term contracts. The understanding was that these lands were theirs to manage. Among these lands, those officially designated as collective or "common" property, were the collective forests for each hamlet.

Additionally, following allocation, villagers turned high elevation shifting cultivation fields, which had been parceled to households, into collectively managed pastures. Sale of livestock was a major source of household income, second only to tin (see below).

There were also many areas of forest and tea fields where anyone could herd livestock, or pick wild fruits and vegetables. In other words, either officially or informally, commonly used lands were a prominent feature of Mengsong land uses.

### **Livelihoods**

In 1997 a state-run manganese mining operation hired villagers in Mengsong to load and unload the ore from trucks. Villagers who worked in manganese were paid reasonably well. Aside from manganese mining, the only business in Mengsong was tin mining. The administrative village head, Akheu, organized the mining so that anyone in Mengsong could mine the tin, but they had to sell it to him. He routinely pocketed some of the profits from resale that were meant to go to the administrative village. The tin mining made Akheu a wealthy man. It's important to note, however, that for villagers as well, income from tin mining was the highest source of household income. Whether for Akheu or the villagers, tin was important, and the income from selling it accrued to people in Mengsong.

Five years ago, the hamlet that I analyzed in depth was doing reasonably well economically, with broad based gradual increases in household income. Men and women, in diverse ways, were producing for markets and engaged in wage labor, mostly in local mining.

### **Narratives about Akha<sup>2</sup>**

There was more than one narrative circulating about minority nationalities in 1997. At times administrators in township and county offices would make broad-brush claims about the “backwardness” of all minority nationalities, especially the upland

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<sup>2</sup> In China, Akha are subsumed within the official Hani minority nationality. Since Mengsong residents call themselves Akha, that is the name used here.

groups who were all thought to “eat the mountains.” At other times, however, officials in these same offices, in focusing on Akha, would say the Akha were the “most developed” among the hill peoples. When asked, these officials would say this meant that Akha sent their children to school, participated in markets, and were willing to try new crop varieties. In other words, Akha sought to be educated, entrepreneurial, and scientific—all characteristics of “people of quality.”

In relation to the forests, although township and county foresters were ambivalent about Akha forest management, in 1984, as part of decollectivization, representatives of the local forestry station had allocated areas for forest protection in Mengsong in the same sites where Akha had customarily protected a watershed forest, a cemetery forest, and a ring of forest around each hamlet. In other words, during the early period of economic reforms, administrators adopted a narrative about Akha that endowed them with some knowledge about forest protection, as well as some characteristics of “people of high quality.”

### **Events between 1997 and 2002**

In the five years between 1997 and 2002, there were several important events that directly affected Mengsong. Deng Xiaoping died in 1997, ushering in a period of major rethinking and reshuffling of leaders in Beijing. Among their considerations were China’s possible entry into WTO, and the growing disparities in income in China between east and west (Goodman 2001). Internal debates centered on how to prepare China for WTO, and how to alleviate poverty in the West and incorporate it more completely into China (Goodman 2001; Economy 2002).

In 1998, central leaders interpreted massive flooding along the Yangtze River and in Heilongjiang as an environmental catastrophe. One cause attributed to the Yangtze flooding was “chaotic” tree cutting by farmers along the upper watersheds. The central state response to the environmental disaster was to bring both forests and people under central control. The result was a timber ban that gradually extended across the West, including in Mengsong, although Mengsong is on the Mekong watershed, not the Yangtze.

In 2000, central leaders launched the Open Up the West project, one of several regional projects designed to improve China’s infrastructure and technology in preparation for the anticipated foreign investment that would arrive as a result of China’s accession into WTO. Additionally, one component of Open Up the West was called “ecological construction,” a campaign to peg down territory and rural labor in the West through a massive mobilization for greening. Forestry departments were to pay villagers to plant trees in any “wastelands,” and farmers were enjoined to either let trees regenerate or plant trees on any sloping agricultural fields. Through a policy called “green for grain,” farmers were to receive 150 kilos of grain and 20 *yuan* per year for each *mu* of cultivated land that they allowed to regenerate into trees (15 *mu* = 1 ha). The scale of labor mobilization is reminiscent of earlier Maoist campaigns, but here the labor was organized to prepare China’s environment for WTO (Jhaveri n.d.).

In 2000, Mengsong held the first local village elections under the Organic Law. By then, local village elections had been implemented throughout China over the past ten-plus years. The national government and the Communist Party had promoted the elections as something new, enabling local people to use secret ballots to participate in

voting local leaders in and out of office. According to Western scholars, the elections policy reflected central state concern with corruption at county and township levels of government, especially in Western China; disaffection of villagers in Western China as they become poorer in relation to people in the east; and WTO requirements that China move toward a “transparent” and fair process of governance (Horsley 2001; Unger 2000; O’Brien and Li 1999; O’Brien 1994).

Policies and pronouncements in China had hailed these local village elections as a means for local people to manage their local affairs. The elections were said to devolve “power” (in political science terms) to local people. From the point of view of Mengsong villagers, however, the process looked different. The elections, as introduced by a township working group, moved “power” from the hamlet up to the administrative village, together with most matters of decision-making. The official explanation offered by the working group was the need to “unify administration” (*tongyi yidian*) to make Mengsong “easier to manage” (*guanlixing*). This explanation sounded as if Mengsong would be “easier to manage” for the township.

In February 2002, just before my arrival, Mengsong was officially designated as a “poor village.” This means that Mengsong qualifies for increased state funding and “help” from outside. In practice, this justifies increased state presence and decision-making about how to use resources in Mengsong.

In early 2002, by the time of my return to Mengsong, Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji were on television as they visited cities in Western China. They were explaining daily the reasons for the addition of business people (in addition to peasants and workers) to the realms of citizens represented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This move

was portrayed as a national development, since China depends on entrepreneurs to grow the economy. Still, the leaders were presenting their explanations in the West, and the new representation was promoted as being critical to the Open up the West Project. In official pronouncements about “the West”, Yunnan featured prominently (Goodman 2001).

All of the events from 1997 to 20002 recounted here represent centralization of decision-making and reclaiming of rural resources earlier allocated to villages and households. The emphasis on preparation for WTO, as well as the inclusion of business people among those represented by the Communist Party, reflect a rise in the official position of business people as they take on a central role in national party leaders’ goals. The confluence of all these events over a five-year period, then, provides the context within which Mengsong local village elections took place.

### **The Local Village Election**

In my village stays in March and July of 2002, many Mengsong residents related that township officials had strongly encouraged them to elect people who were of “higher quality” than those in the past. This included the administrative village head and other members of the village committee. Those with more education could bring about faster economic development in Mengsong. The undertones of “science” and “rationality” are very close to the surface in these directives, as they are in many discussions of elections and education in China (O’Brien 2001:413-414, 418). Additionally, in this case township officials had pointed to a man called Lao Er who had been interim administrative village head when the previous man died, an instance similar to 1993 when Akheu was appointed. Lao Er, the township officials said, had completed middle school, whereas the

“old guard” had only completed elementary school. Unsurprisingly, Lao Er is now administrative village head in Mengsong.

This emphasis on education and “people of quality” is not new. Ever since I started going to China regularly in 1985, officials have talked about rural people whose quality was very low, and who lacked “culture” (read education). Narratives that link science, education, and development have been in circulation in China for many years. And indeed, the “old guard” in Mengsong, meaning Akheu and the hamlet heads from five years earlier, each told me privately that at the time of the election they had voluntarily stepped aside, believing that younger, more highly educated people might indeed do a better job. This conforms to Anagnost’s analysis that those of “low quality” are blamed for holding China back. (Older here means men in their 40s, whereas the newly elected crew are young men in their early 30s).

The younger, newer officials, whom I interviewed many times, were all fresh-faced and pleasant. In contrast to the “old guard” from five years earlier, though, these new officials were sitting around waiting for higher ups to tell them how to increase agricultural productivity and grow the local economy. It also seemed that their knowledge about new possibilities in Mengsong was not extensive, and that they didn’t know how to negotiate how policies and programs would be implemented. For example, in a week of interviewing hamlet heads and former informants, I had learned that a company from Taiwan had offered to pave the road from the main hamlet to the reservoir, and that a Hong Kong company had assessed the possibility of turning the reservoir into a tourist facility with rental boats. When I asked the administrative village head and the party secretary about these possibilities, they had not heard of them. In a

setting like Mengsong, either of these proposals would have been a major event. While we might read this as a single instance of electing somewhat incompetent people, it's curious that moving "power" and decision making from the hamlet to the administrative village level also removed considerable clout from those 40 year olds who used to go around pounding on desks protesting corruption and asking for funds. As of 2002, having hamlet heads visit officials in township and county offices is now a thing of the past.

Meanwhile, when I interviewed the old guard, whether Akheu or the former hamlet heads I knew best, they are now seriously dissatisfied. They claim that the new young officials don't know how to operate. The new crew won't protest against policies that are inimical to Mengsong, such as the timber ban and ecological construction, and won't insist that such policies be reworked to suit local conditions. The old guard say that the younger village officials don't have the ability (*nengli*) that they themselves had. It's notable that the old guard use the word ability, rather than quality, in describing people who can get things done.

### **The Timber Ban and Ecological Construction**

The effects of the timber ban and ecological construction on Mengsong are multiple. The state has reclaimed the forest. Villagers are not allowed to cut any trees in the state forest. They have to get a permit and pay a fee to cut trees in the hamlet collective forest. At the same time, the township pays villagers to manage the collective forest and household forests, which now belong to the state. This shift in emphasis, however, is not the critical issue, although villagers find it annoying to get permits and pay fees for trees that they have kept in good condition.

The critical issues for forests are two. First, the way the timber ban and ecological construction have been implemented means that villagers can no longer practice shifting cultivation. Villagers are allowed to cut small trees, below a certain diameter, but they must leave larger trees in place. This rule alone effectively ends shifting cultivation. Farmers can't cut enough trees over a large enough area to make a good burn. The implications of this curtailment are numerous: a loss of area to produce grain, a loss of biodiversity in swiddens in various stages of regeneration, and a loss of land available for new uses, including commonly-managed ones. On the issue of loss of grain, the state has come up with the "grain for green" plan to give each household 150 kilos of grain plus 20 yuan per year for every *mu* of shifting cultivation land that regenerates into trees. Foresters I interviewed were excited about this policy. In the near future, though, officials are likely to view this policy as giving welfare payments to backward upland farmers who aren't advanced enough to earn money to buy grain. This policy will in effect shift the narrative of upland peoples from those who used to "eat the mountain" to those who now "eat the state."

Second, there is no longer any land for pasture. The forestry department requires villagers to plant either pine trees or tea on what was pastureland.<sup>3</sup> As a result, most villagers have sold all their water buffalo and cattle. Five years earlier, sale of livestock was the second highest source of household income.

### **Businesses, especially mining**

Tin mining is now contracted out to a company in Kunming. This company pays the hamlet an annual fee, but this fee doesn't contribute to household income. The

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<sup>3</sup> The ecological construction policy mentions only sloping cultivated land as needing to be regenerated into trees. In Mingsong, though, the policy applies to pastures as well.

manganese mining operation now contracts workers from elsewhere to load and unload trucks in Mengsong. A company from Fujian now mines *gaolingtú*, a white clay used to make fine porcelain. This company hires laborers from elsewhere to do the mining. The real income from all these activities is going to enterprises outside Mengsong.

### **Akheu, the entrepreneur**

Akheu is the boss of the tin mining crew. He was ousted from his role as administrative village head, but now he's prominent in one of the businesses in Mengsong. Akheu is remaking himself into an entrepreneur, one of those business people represented by the Communist Party of China. He's also making himself into a person of higher quality, an entrepreneur who intends to follow the track of business, rather than state administration, as the avenue to becoming a person who counts in China. He may be wending his way back into a position of considerable influence.

### **Outcomes and Implications**

A summary of the events and outcomes I encountered in 2002, together with their implications, links together the election of people of higher quality, the timber ban, "ecological construction" and the Open Up the West Project, and the inclusion of business people among those represented by the CCP.

The state has reclaimed the forest, and in that process determined several changes in land use. These include the loss of shifting cultivation, the loss of pastures, and the loss of related possibilities for raising livestock, reproducing biodiversity, and altering land uses to suit local needs. These changes mean a loss of income as well as loss of local control over new possibilities for these lands. This change also represents the loss

of the commons, whether officially designated as “collective” forest, or informally arranged as in shifting cultivation lands turning into village pastures.

In relation to citizenship and the election, people of higher quality, which is to say with more education, have been elected to administrative village positions. In this particular instance, the elected officials are more amenable to following those in higher levels of administration, especially at the township level, than were officials in the past. Indeed, administration has become more transparent, but this is transparency from above rather than transparency from below, which is the common usage. Township administrators have fewer village officials to oversee and influence than before, and these new officials have been educated and molded more thoroughly into seeing the world as state officials do. Meanwhile, those officials of “lower quality”—those who would protest the implementation of the timber ban and ecological construction—are out of office.

In relation to citizenship and business people, the CCP now represents business people, and encourages them to help grow the economy. In Mengsong, the “business people” are the contractors, the ones who will make money from mining or other new operations. It’s the contractors who are extracting the minerals and their value from the mountains. The profit is flowing away. This contrasts with the experience of tin mining in the past, even though the profits from tin mining were not equitably distributed. Akheu, the former administrative village head, is maneuvering his way into being a person of quality, a citizen-entrepreneur. He has found another pathway for becoming a player in the local and regional scene.

The designation of Mengsong as a “poor village” relegates the whole of Mengsong as a site of “people of low quality.” This official pronouncement reinforces the essentialized designation of Akha as one of the backward hill peoples, those who “eat the mountain.” In spite of the election of officials of slightly higher “quality,” the whole population of Akha in Mengsong has been cast into the realm of those who don’t know how to manage forests, don’t know how to develop, and who have even gone backward over the past few years. Five years earlier there were variable narratives about Akha, some of which granted Akha some characteristics of “people of high quality”. Now the narrative has become unified as people lacking in quality, blamed for deforestation, and identified as “poor” as well as backward.

This designation as a poor village, meanwhile, obscures the state’s role in having brought about this poverty by reclaiming the forest, ending shifting cultivation, and seriously reducing numbers of livestock. The designation also further justifies allowing outside businesses to contract resource management and extraction in Mengsong in ways that will remove profit from local people, as in the tin mining now contracted to an outside firm. Business people have moved up in quality, under preparations for WTO and inclusion among those represented by the party.

I return now to the local village elections, which is where I started. Mengsong villagers elected people of higher quality in a process that had been heralded as enabling greater local participation in selecting local leaders and running their own affairs. The election took place, however, in a context and manner that actually increased township oversight and control of decisions in Mengsong, as management became more “transparent” and those elected were the ones selected as examples by township

administrators. Local village elections had initially been launched in 1987, during an era of devolution of decision-making. The elections arrived in Mengsong in 2000, during a time of recentralization of planning and responsibility. The elections were close in time to the timber ban and ecological construction, both of which augmented state control over the landscape in multiple ways. Official designation of Mengsong as a poor village legitimates greater outside intervention in Mengsong affairs, whether in the form of new land uses or new businesses. The official name of “poor village” also slots Akha into the ranks of people of low quality, in contrast to the earlier narrative of Akha as interested in education, marketing, and science. This is then a paradoxical outcome. The elections took place in a milieu of strongly increased state control over decisions, natural resources, and the future of economic development in Mengsong. The future will likely be in the hands of business contractors, including Akheu in his new incarnation as the entrepreneur-citizen.

All of these moves are now unfolding within the grand sweep of the Open Up the West Project, a huge, state-led development scheme. Such a scheme demands large visions, bold plans, and essentialized representations of the passive populations to be transformed by Opening up the West. This is not the realm of decentralized decision-making, and adjusting policies to meet local needs--the trend from the early 1980s to the late-1990s. With the possible entry into WTO, however, and with the flooding on the Yangtze interpreted as a national environmental catastrophe, the shift was on toward national visions, large-scale development plans, and a general reclaiming of initiative by the central party and government. This has also entailed the promotion of business people to the ranks of those represented by the CCP. This grand restructuring is not a

return to state planning as in a command economy. It's a realignment of the ranks of people of high quality and people of low quality, with business people in a capitalist economy now in a starring role. The West is to be remade as a receptacle for foreign investment in the globalized world of WTO.

In this context, it seems that the local village election in Mengsong, and its electing people of higher quality, is somewhat irrelevant. The real players will be the contractors and other much larger entrepreneurs. In relation to the timber ban and ecological construction, the national vision of forests across the West will obscure the loss of local commons and ensuing loss of incomes. In an indirect but important way, the irrelevance of the election and the invisible loss of the commons are related, as becomes clear when analyzed in relation to the narrative of people of high and low quality, the likely winners and losers as China gears up for WTO.

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