

Elections, Citizenship, and the Shape of Resource Access on the Periphery of China

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“State formation occurs anywhere and everywhere that ‘the state’ is invoked to arbitrate disputes between villagers” Tania Murray Li, 2001.

In 1998, local village elections were held for the first time in Mengsong, an ethnic minority locale in southern Yunnan right on the border with Burma. This event marked the arrival of a national political project on the periphery of Yunnan, itself a peripheral province in the southwest of China. Mengsong and its inhabitants, though, have been included within the People’s Republic of China since 1950. All residents of China, including those in Mengsong, were automatically citizens as of the revolution. The meaning and practice of “citizenship” have shifted considerably since the founding of the New China. These shifts have occurred at identifiable moments when changes in the meaning of citizenship accompanied state-sponsored changes in property relations. With the formation of agricultural communes in the late 1950s, rural citizens became laborers producing grain for the state. In the early 1980s, the distribution of commune land to households marked a major change that reconstituted citizens from laborers for the state to entrepreneurs for the household. This transformation also reworked citizenship into a more active role in contributing to national economic development. With the recent implementation of village elections, the role of villagers as citizens of China has changed again. Potentially, participation in elections will increase villagers’ participation in the governance of the administrative village. In principle, elections will also change the national role of villagers, now decision-makers in political processes rather than just “farmers,” however entrepreneurial. In Mengsong, the direct election of the administrative village head may also have changed how villagers’ gain access to resources as they become commodities. In this area, the last administrative village head was notoriously corrupt, managing to skew the benefits of emerging resources to himself. With the institution of village elections, the reframing of citizenship is once again part and parcel of a reworking of property dynamics—at least potentially. In this research, then, I will explore how local elections and local resource access are combined in new practices and understandings of citizenship for members of a minority nationality on the borders of China.

Mengsong is a Hani (Akha¹) administrative village comprised of 11 hamlets. The current configuration of formal property rights in Mengsong was ushered in during the early economic reforms. In Mengsong, as elsewhere across rural China, state-allocated property rights in land and trees were issued in 1982-84, following the dissolution of communes. Agricultural land was allocated to households based on household population at that time. In this mountainous area devoted to upland rice as well as wet rice, each household received both wet rice fields and areas for shifting cultivation. In 1984, forested land was also distributed to hamlets and households for subsistence uses. According to villagers, the allocation of both agricultural and forest lands was reasonably equitable and fair. Since 1982, some households

¹ In China, Akha have been subsumed under the Hani as an official minority nationality. Since Akha call themselves and their language Akha, that is the term used here.

have traded plots of agricultural land, and others have turned shifting cultivation fields into terraces for wet rice (Sturgeon 2000). Fundamentally, however, villagers in Mengsong have little quarrel with the state allocation of property rights in land and trees, or with the shift in role to entrepreneur brought in tandem with these policy changes. In general, a state desire to have local people manage local resources and take responsibility for their own incomes was met by a local desire to manage landscapes in their own fashion.

The bone of contention in Mengsong, up to 1997, had been closer to home. Fiery conflicts erupted between local villagers and the administrative village head over who could claim the advantage from resources as they began to be bought and sold. The first major conflict, beginning in 1985, centered on the discovery of tin on one hamlet's wet rice fields. While the villagers in this hamlet argued that the tin was theirs to mine and sell, based on state-allocated property rights in wet rice fields,² the administrative village head claimed the tin as belonging to the whole of Mengsong. Since he was the lowest level state administrator, backed up by officials in both the township and county, he could make his decision stick. He declared that anyone in the 11-hamlet area could mine the tin. Then he set up a company to receive the tin and forced all villagers to sell their tin to his company. Although this was an administrative village "project," with Mengsong slated to receive income from resale of the tin, the administrative village head directed to his own pocket approximately 100,000 *yuan* (about US\$20,000 at the time) from the resale of tin, funds that should have gone to Mengsong.

The second major conflict in Mengsong between villagers and the administrative village head concerned a wasteland auction. Based on the policy initiated in Yunnan in 1994, villages could decide to auction off "wasteland" in the village area to either local or outside bidders who promised to reforest and keep the auctioned site in trees for contracts of up to 99 years. In Mengsong, however, the administrative village head and the "buyer" carried out the "auction" in secret. The buyer acquired land in the watershed of the Mengsong reservoir, filing the auction papers with the township forestry station. Although the papers stipulated that affected people had agreed to the sale, the auction had been completed without villagers' knowledge or approval. When villagers from Mengsong came to protest the wasteland auction, township forestry staff claimed that the deal was already done. This support from the forestry station reveals the administrative village head's close relations with township officials. Through this transaction, moreover, the administrative village head underscored for Mengsong villagers his role as the person who determines who gets access to new resources.

My previous field research in Mengsong traced the constitution of resource access from the 1930s to 1997. In 1998, the Yunnan provincial government decided to implement the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees throughout the province. According to the law, villagers are to elect the administrative village head and a village committee from a slate of candidates. The election marks an abrupt change in how the managing committee for the administrative village is chosen. In place of being appointed by the township, the next level of government, the committee and its head were now in principle elected by local villagers. From the context of this event, my research questions are three:

² By law in China all minerals belong to the state. In a case like this, where the quality and quantity of the mineral was low, state officials do not intervene to claim the mineral, so long as the state receives its tax when the mineral is sold.

- 1) In the wake of the election of the administrative village head, who can claim access to emerging resources, how are they allocated, and who benefits from their sale?
- 2) What is villagers' understanding and practice of citizenship in relation to local village elections? How does this compare with the understanding of township and county officials?
- 3) How do state goals and villagers' desires intersect in the implementation and outcomes of the local village election as an instance of state formation?

The growing body of work on local village elections in China suggests that the outcomes of having elected local committees are not simple or obvious, nor is there any assurance that local elections will result in greater benefits to local villagers. In cases elsewhere in China, there are instances where the village committee, once elected, never meets, or comes under the sway of the previous village leadership (Unger 2000:91; O'Brien 1994). In other cases township officials control the elections, or in some instances seemingly fair elections lead to domination by the largest lineage group, a result that perpetuates patterns of favoritism or corruption from the past (Unger 2000; O'Brien 1994). There are also cases of villagers not even hearing about village elections (O'Brien and Li 1995). Indeed, O'Brien and Li argue that cadres at the county and township level often derail local elections, since these local cadres gain no career benefits from supporting elections or dealing with newly-elected village committees (O'Brien and Li 1999). In some cases in poorer areas, farmers in "paralyzed villages" have suffered from corrupt local cadres and think that elections would not change this pattern (O'Brien 1994:52). There have nonetheless been instances where local village elections have enabled villagers to oust corrupt village heads and secure more equitable distribution of benefits from economic development (Unger 2000; O'Brien and Li 1999, 1995; O'Brien 1994).

My work will contribute to an understanding of election dynamics by exploring local village elections in Mengsong as an instance of state formation. One definition of state formation explains that it takes place when new practices are formed through both state implementation and local initiative, forming institutions that are "recognizable and manipulable by existing state authority" (Agrawal 2001:35). State acts of deregulation or decentralization, for example, may in effect make villagers "accomplices in their own control" (Agrawal 2001:25). State formation can also be read as the "shifting configuration of coercion and desire" in the institution of new practices of markets and governance (Li 2001:56). In the quotation from Tania Li cited at the top, state formation occurs whenever local people invoke the state in settling disputes (Li 2001:4-5). In other words, villagers in Mengsong may welcome local village elections as a means to oust a corrupt administrative village head, as an expression of their desire. Meanwhile the implementation of elections may also make local administration more visible and therefore more subject to control from higher levels of administration. The process may co-opt villagers into participating in new political practices that the state can more easily influence, ushering in new forms of subtle state coercion.

State actions may also pressure villagers to participate in markets, but villagers may engage in marketing willingly, following their own desires (Li 2001:53). In acquiring and selling natural resources and agricultural products, farmers are both increasing household incomes and becoming new kinds of consuming citizens, as well as responding to state incentives and veiled coercion. This process corresponds to voting in elections, where villagers participate in choosing administrators and becoming citizens of a different sort, possibly more empowered, possibly more tightly embraced in state plans. As research elsewhere in the world has shown, state formation includes the production of new identities and desires, often in complex forms only obliquely related to state plans (cf. Joseph and Nugent 1994).

Although the administrative village head described here conforms to the corrupt cadre in O'Brien's "paralyzed village" typology, villagers in Mengsong refer to the head before him as having been effective and fair. Villagers may have interpreted local elections as a means to put in place someone like this previous head. My hypothesis is that Mengsong villagers would have jumped at an opportunity for local elections, although the role played by township and county officials remains to be examined. To discover how local village elections were carried out in Mengsong, I will interview villagers in several Mengsong hamlets, officials from the village committee, and relevant township and county administrators. To explore new meanings and practices of citizenship, I will hold group and individual interviews with villagers of differing age, gender, and political status throughout Mengsong. To find out how access to emerging resources is claimed and controlled, I will trace how natural resources and new agricultural products in Mengsong have become market commodities in the time since 1997.

In previous research, I explored in depth the constitution of access to resources from the 1930s to 1997 in one hamlet in Mengsong (Sturgeon 2000). This new research will build on that work, allowing me to benefit from relationships formed during 20 months of fieldwork. It will also form the next chapter in the resource access drama, one that contributes to the literatures on local village elections in China, state formation, and practices of citizenship.

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